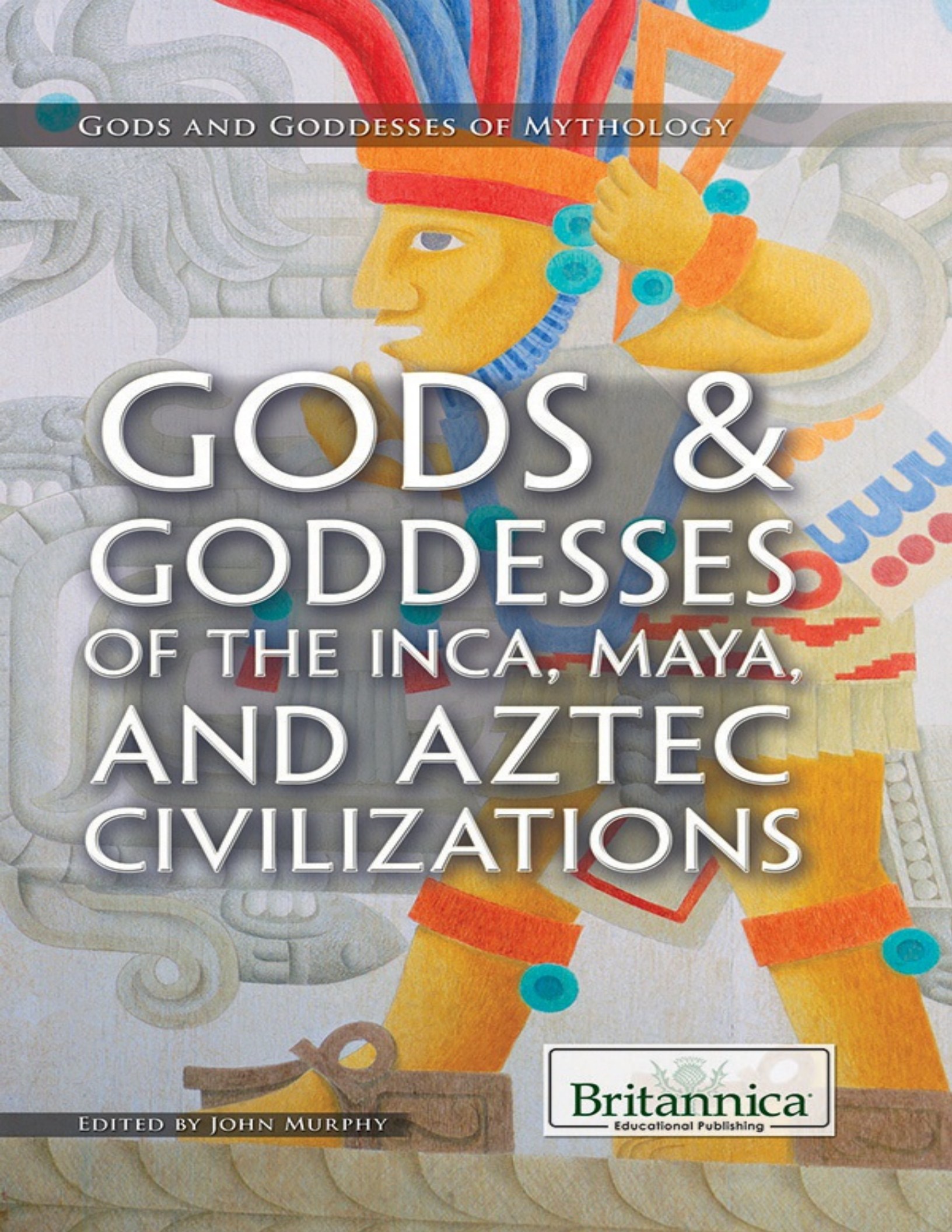
GODS AND GODDESSES OF MYTHOLOGY
GODS & GODDESSES OF THE INCA, MAYA, AND AZTEC CIVILIZATIONS
EDITED BY JOHN MURPHY
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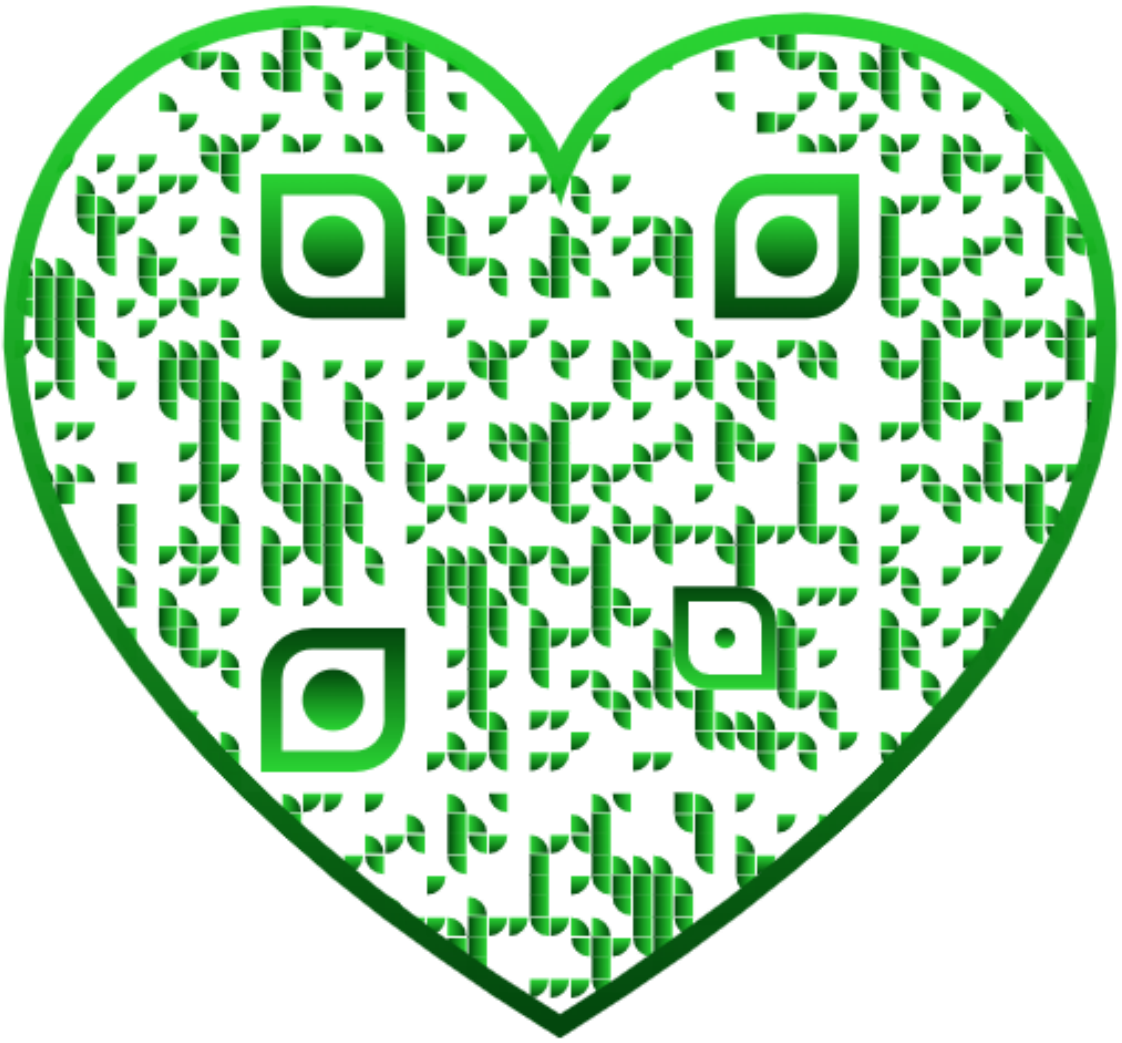

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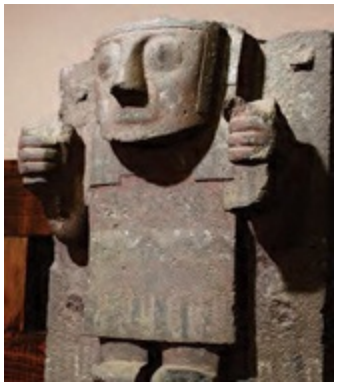

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INTRODUCTION

A carving of the Mayan and Aztec feathered serpent god Quetzalcóatl appears on the side of the Temple of Quetzalcóatl in Teotihuacán in Mexico. Gordon Galbraith/Shutterstock.com

The term "Mesoamerica" denotes the part of Mexico and Central America that was civilized in pre-Spanish times. In many respects, the American Indians—including the Maya, Aztec, and Inca civilizations—who inhabited Mesoamerica were the most advanced native peoples in the Western Hemisphere. The northern border of Mesoamerica runs west from a point on the Gulf Coast of Mexico above the modern port of Tampico, then dips south to exclude much of the central desert of highland Mexico, meeting the Pacific Coast opposite the tip of Baja (Lower) California. On the southeast, the

boundary extends from northwestern Honduras on the Caribbean across to the Pacific shore in El Salvador. Thus, about half of Mexico, all of Guatemala and Belize, and parts of Honduras and El Salvador are included in Mesoamerica (the Inca, though based in what would become modern-day Peru and controlling territory running along much of South America’s Pacific Coast, are nevertheless considered a Mesoamerican civilization).

Geographically and culturally, Mesoamerica consists of two strongly contrasted regions: highland and lowland. The Mexican highlands are formed mainly by the two Sierra Madre ranges that sweep down on the east and west. Lying athwart them is a volcanic cordillera stretching from the Atlantic to the Pacific. The high valleys and landlocked basins of Mexico were important centres of pre-Spanish civilization. In the southeastern part of Mesoamerica lie the partly volcanic Chiapas–Guatemala highlands. The lowlands are primarily coastal. Particularly important was the littoral plain extending south along the Gulf of Mexico, expanding to include the Petén-Yucatán Peninsula, homeland of the Mayan peoples.

The extreme diversity of the Mesoamerican environment produced what has been called symbiosis among its subregions. Interregional exchange of agricultural products, luxury items, and other commodities led to the development of large and well-regulated markets in which cacao beans were used for money. It may have also led to large-scale political unity and even to states and empires. High agricultural productivity resulted in a nonfarming class of artisans who were responsible for an advanced stone architecture, featuring the construction of stepped pyramids, and for highly evolved styles of sculpture, pottery, and painting.

The Mesoamerican system of thought, recorded in folding-screen books of deerskin or bark paper, was perhaps of even greater importance in setting them off from other New World peoples. This system was ultimately based upon a calendar in which a ritual cycle of 260 (13 × 20) days intermeshed with a “vague year” of 365 days (18 × 20 days, plus five “nameless” days), producing a 52-year Calendar Round.

Mesoamerican religion, called Christo-pagan by anthropologists, is a complex syncretism of indigenous beliefs and the Christianity of early Roman Catholic missionaries. A hierarchy of indigenous supernatural beings (some benign, others not) have been reinterpreted as Christian deities and saints. Mountain and water spirits are appeased at special altars in sacred places by gift or animal sacrifice. Individuals have companion spirits in the

form of animals or natural phenomena, such as lightning or shooting stars. Disease is associated with witchcraft or failure to appease malevolent spirits.

Religious life was geared to the ritual cycle of the Calendar Round. The Mesoamerican pantheon was associated with the calendar and featured an old, dual creator god; a god of royal descent and warfare; a sun god and moon goddess; a rain god; a culture hero called the Feathered Serpent; and many other deities. Also characteristic was a layered system of 13 heavens and nine underworlds, each with its presiding god. Much of the system was under the control of a priesthood that also maintained an advanced knowledge of astronomy.

Mesoamerican religion is exceptionally rich in mythology. Myths are symbolic narratives, usually of unknown origin and at least partly traditional, that ostensibly relate or attempt to explain and make sense of actual events or natural phenomena. Myths are especially associated with religious belief. They are distinguished from symbolic behaviour (cult, ritual) and symbolic places or objects (temples, icons), but provide the spiritual narrative that underpins both sacred ritual and the sacred places in which such rituals are enacted.

In essence, myths are specific accounts of gods or superhuman beings involved in extraordinary events or circumstances in a time that is unspecified but which is understood as existing apart from ordinary human experience. Few world mythologies exist further beyond the ordinary and everyday than those of the Maya, Aztec, and Inca, and the same is true of their deities and spiritual practices. In these pages, readers will encounter the wondrously complex, sophisticated, and cosmically synchronized pantheon and mythology of the Maya, Aztec, and Inca. Sharing certain common cultural traits and traditions, but glittering with fascinating and unique variations and elaborations on these core beliefs, each of the great Mesoamerican civilizations presents an enthralling array of gods, goddesses, myths, practices, rituals, holidays, and beliefs. Awaiting the reader is a rich treasury of story and drama, both earthly and celestial, human and divine.

CHAPTER 1

THE ORIGINS OF MESOAMERICAN CIVILIZATIONS AND RELIGION

Archaeologists have dated human presence in Mesoamerica to as early as 21,000 BCE. By 11,000 BCE, hunting-and-gathering peoples occupied most of the New World south of the glacial ice cap covering northern North America. The cooler climate of this period as compared with that of today supported a grassland vegetation, especially in the highland valleys, that was ideal for large herds of grazing animals. The shift toward sedentary agriculture apparently began after about 7000 BCE, when a dramatic global warming caused the glaciers to retreat and tropical forests to overtake the Mesoamerican grasslands.

The gradual domestication of successful food plants—most notably a mutant corn (maize) with husks—over succeeding millennia gave rise to more or less permanent village farming life by about 1500 BCE. In addition to corn, crops included beans, squashes, chili peppers, and cotton. As agricultural productivity improved, the rudiments of civilization emerged during the period designated by archaeologists as the Early Formative (1500–900 BCE). Pottery, which had appeared in some areas of the region as early as 2300 BCE, perhaps introduced from Andean cultures to the south, took on varied and sophisticated forms. The idea of the temple-pyramid seems to have taken root during this period.

THE FIRST GREAT MESOAMERICAN CIVILIZATION: THE OLMEC

Corn cultivation in one area—the humid and fertile lowlands of southern Veracruz and Tabasco, in Mexico—was sufficiently productive to permit a major diversion of human energy into other activities, such as the arts and commerce. Struggles for control of this rich but limited farmland resulted in a dominant landowning class that shaped the first great Mesoamerican civilization, the Olmec.

A page from the Aztec Codex Fejérváry-Mayer depicts the fortunes of the corn crop over a two-year period. In the bottom right panel the Aztec rain god Tlaloc blesses the corn plant. In the bottom left panel, Xipe Totec, the god of spring and new vegetation, presides. Werner Forman/Universal Images Group/Getty Images

San Lorenzo, the oldest known Olmec centre, dates to about 1150 BCE, a time when the rest of Mesoamerica was at best on a Neolithic level. The site is most noted for its extraordinary stone monuments, especially the “colossal heads” measuring up to 9 feet (nearly 3 metres) in height and possibly representing players in a sacred rubber-ball game.

The period known as the Middle Formative (900–300 BCE), during which the La Venta urban complex rose and flourished, was one of increased cultural regionalism. The Zapotec people, for example, attained a high level of development at Monte Albán, producing the first writing and written calendar in Mesoamerica. However, at this site, as well as in the Valley of Mexico, the Olmec presence can be widely detected.

In the subsequent Late Formative and Classic periods, lasting until about 700–900 CE, the well-known Maya, Zapotec, Totonac, and Teotihuacán civilizations developed distinctive variations on their shared Olmec heritage. The Maya, for example, brought astronomy, mathematics, calendar making, and hieroglyphic writing, as well as monumental architecture, to their highest expression in the New World. At the same time, Teotihuacán, in the Valley

of Mexico, became the capital of a political and commercial empire encompassing much of Mesoamerica.

Early Mesoamerican Religious Life

Early religious phenomena can only be deduced from archaeological remains. Numerous clay figurines found in tombs afford little evidence of religious beliefs during the agricultural Pre-Classic periods of Zacatenco and Ticomán (roughly 1500 to the 1st century BCE). It is possible, however, that terra-cotta statuettes of women were meant to represent an agricultural deity, a goddess of the crops. Two-headed figurines found at Tlatilco, a site of the late Pre-Classic, may portray a supernatural being. Clay idols of a fire god in the form of an old man with an incense burner on his back date from the same period.

A Mesoamerican sculpture of a woman with two faces dates from c. *800 BCE.* DEA/G. Dagli Orti/De Agostini/ Getty Image

The first stone monument on the Mexican plateau is the pyramid of

Cuicuilco, near Mexico City. In fact, it is rather a truncated cone, with a stone core; the rest is made of sun-dried brick with a stone facing. It shows the main features of the Mexican pyramids as they were developed in later times. It was doubtless a religious monument, crowned by a temple built on the terminal platform and surrounded with tombs. The building of such a structure obviously required a protracted and organized effort under the command of the priests.

The Cuicuilco Pyramid is known as the Great Circular Plinth and is situated near modern-day Mexico City. Omar Torres/AFP/Getty Images

The final phase of the Pre-Classic cultures of the central highland forms a transition from the village to the city, from rural to urban life. This was a far-reaching social and intellectual revolution, bringing about new religious ideas together with new art forms and theocratic regimes. In the Early Classic Period that followed, this shift to deity-dominated urban environments found its apotheosis in Teotihuacán.

Carved figures and deities adorn the side of the Temple of Quetzalcóatl near Mexico City. Hulton Archive/Getty Images

TEOTIHUACÁN

Teotihuacán, which was located in the Valley of Teotihuacán, a pocketlike extension of the Valley of Mexico on its northeastern side, was probably the largest city of the New World before the arrival of the Spaniards. At its height, toward the close of the 6th century CE, it covered about 8 square miles (20 square kilometres) and may have housed more than 150,000 inhabitants. The city was divided into quarters by two great avenues that crosscut each other at right angles, and the entire city was laid out on a grid plan oriented to these avenues. The Avenue of the Dead, the main north–south artery of the city, is aligned to a point 16° east of true north, which may have had astrological meaning.

Teotihuacán was the greatest city of Mesoamerica, indeed, of all pre-Columbian America. Authorities are divided as to whether it was the capital of a great political empire. Some believe that Teotihuacán’s expansion was carried by force of arms; others believe its power to have been largely economic and religious. In either case, at its height in the 6th century Teotihuacán was the greatest civilization in Mesoamerica, with an influence that far outstripped that of the later Aztec empire. For the archaeologist, the

universal spread of Teotihuacán ceramic and other traits constitutes an Early Classic horizon.

"CITY OF THE GODS"

The name Teotihuacán meant "City of the Gods" (or, "Where Men Became Gods") in Aztec times, and although the city had been largely deserted since its decline, the Aztec royal house made annual pilgrimages to the site. Teotihuacán culture exerted a profound influence on all contemporary and later Mesoamerican cultures. Many Aztec gods, such as Tlaloc, his consort Chalchiuhtlicue, and Quetzalcóatl, were worshipped by the Teotihuacanos. Like the Aztec, the Teotihuacanos generally cremated their dead. In fact, there are so many congruences between Teotihuacán practices and those of the later Toltec and Aztec that some authorities believe them to have been speakers of a Náhuatl language and the precursors of those people. Some linguistic authorities, however, believe that the Teotihuacanos spoke a Totonac language, similar to what was spoken by the inhabitants of central Veracruz. It is not known whether the people of the city, like the Maya, were literate.

The End of a Mesoamerican Golden Era

Teotihuacán power diminished after about 600, and for the next several centuries numerous states vied for supremacy. The Toltec of Tula, in central Mexico, prevailed from about 900 to 1200 (the Early Postclassic Period). Following Toltec decline, a further period of unrest in the Late Postclassic Period lasted until 1428, when the Aztec defeated the rival city of Azcapotzalco and became the dominant force in central Mexico. This native Mesoamerican empire fell to the Spaniards, led by Hernán Cortés (or Cortéz), in 1521.

The Inca empire was the largest empire in pre-Columbian America. Though centered in what would become modern-day Peru, the Inca are referred to as a Mesoamerican civilization. The Inca arose from the highlands of Peru sometime in the early 13th century and expanded to dominate the west coast of South America until conquered by Spanish colonizing forces—and a smallpox pandemic—by 1572. The golden age of sophisticated and advanced Mesoamerican culture, religion, science, and technology had come to a brutal and bloody end, yielding to the "civilizing" forces of Spanish conquerors.

CHAPTER 2

THE CULTURE, RELIGION, AND DEITIES OF THE MAYA

The Maya were Mesoamerican Indians occupying a nearly continuous territory in southern Mexico, Guatemala, and northern Belize. In the early 21st century some 70 Mayan languages were spoken by more than five million people, most of whom were bilingual in Spanish. Before the Spanish conquest of Mexico and Central America, the Maya possessed one of the greatest civilizations of the Western Hemisphere. They practiced agriculture, built great stone buildings and pyramid temples, worked gold and copper, and used a form of hieroglyphic writing that has now largely been deciphered.

THE RISE AND FALL OF THE MAYA

As early as 1500 BCE the Maya had settled in villages and had developed an agriculture based on the cultivation of corn (maize), beans, and squash; by 600 CE cassava (manioc) was also grown. They began to build ceremonial centres, and by 200 CE these had developed into cities containing temples, pyramids, palaces, courts for playing ball, and plazas.

The ancient Maya quarried immense quantities of building stone (usually limestone), which they cut using harder stones such as chert. They practiced mainly slash-and-burn agriculture, but they used advanced techniques of irrigation and terracing. They also developed a system of hieroglyphic writing and highly sophisticated calendrical and astronomical systems. The Maya made paper from the inner bark of wild fig trees and wrote their hieroglyphs on books made from this paper. The surviving books are called codices. The Maya also developed an elaborate and beautiful tradition of sculpture and relief carving. Architectural works and stone inscriptions and reliefs are the chief sources of knowledge about the early Maya. Early Mayan culture showed the influence of the earlier Olmec civilization.

The Mayan Temple II, or Temple of the Masks, still stands in Guatemala. It was once the site of religious rituals, including human sacrifices. David Hiser/The Image Bank/Getty Images

The rise of the Maya began about 250 CE, and what is known to archaeologists as the Classic Period of Mayan culture lasted until about 900 CE. At its height, Mayan civilization consisted of more than 40 cities, each with a population between 5,000 and 50,000. Among the principal cities were Tikal, Uaxactún, Copán, Bonampak, Dos Pilas, Calakmul, Palenque, and Río Bec. The peak Mayan population may have reached two million people, most of whom were settled in the lowlands of what is now Guatemala. After 900 CE, however, the Classic Maya civilization declined precipitously, leaving the great cities and ceremonial centres vacant and overgrown with jungle vegetation. Some scholars have suggested that armed conflicts and the exhaustion of agricultural land were responsible for the sudden decline.

THE ENDURING MYSTERY OF THE DESTRUCTION OF THE MAYAN EMPIRE

Discoveries in the 21st century led scholars to posit a number of additional reasons for the destruction of Mayan civilization. One cause was probably the war-related disruption of river and land trade routes. Other contributors may have been deforestation and drought. During the Postclassic Period (900–1519), cities such as Chichén Itzá, Uxmal, and Mayapán in the highlands of the Yucatán Peninsula continued to flourish for several centuries after the great lowland cities had become depopulated. By the time the Spaniards conquered the area in the early 16th century, most

of the Maya had become village-dwelling agriculturists who practiced the religious rites of their forebears.

Deciphering Mayan Hieroglyphics

The four main categories of documents that provide knowledge of the Maya civilization and its religion are: archaeological remains; native books in hieroglyphic writing; books in native languages written in Latin script by learned Indians; and early accounts written in Spanish by conquerors or priests.

From surviving temples, tombs, sculpture, wall paintings, pottery, and carved jades, shells, and bone, a significant amount of valuable information can be gained—e.g., representations of godheads and ritual scenes. Perhaps the most important archaeological source, however, is the hieroglyphic texts carved on stone monuments or stone or bone artifacts and painted on pottery. These, insofar as they can be translated, provide descriptions of ceremonies and beliefs.

Four native hieroglyphic books of pre-Columbian date survived the Spanish conquest. The Dresden, Madrid, and Paris codices are named for the cities in which three of the codices are now housed. The Grolier Codex is named for the Grolier Club in New York City, where the fragment was first displayed to 20th-century scholars. It is housed in Mexico City. Written on bark paper, these codices deal with astronomical calculations, divination, and ritual. They appear to be Postclassic copies of earlier Classic originals.

After the Spanish conquest, books were written by learned Indians who transcribed or summarized hieroglyphic records. Such is the case of the *Books of Chilam Balam*, in Yucatec Maya, and of the *Popol Vuh*, in Quiché, a highland Maya language. The former consist of historical chronicles mixed with myth, divination, and prophecy, and the latter (which shows definite central Mexican influences) embodies the mythology and cosmology of the Postclassic Guatemalan Maya. The *Ritual of the Bacabs* covers religious symbolism, medical incantations, and similar matters.

This page from the Madrid Codex, one of the Mayan sacred books, shows the corn god, Ah Mun (left)*; the rain god, Chac; and several Mayan glyphs.* Courtesy of the Museo de America, Madrid

The most important of the early accounts written by the Spanish themselves is Diego de Landa's *Relación de las cosas de Yucatán* ("On the Things of Yucatán"), which dates to about 1566. It describes Postclassic rather than Classic religion, but given the deeply conservative nature of Maya religion, it is highly probable that much of this description is pertinent for the earlier period. Landa's account is also an excellent description of other aspects of Maya life in 16th-century Yucatán.

To these archaeological, ethnohistorical, and historical sources may be added the observations of modern ethnologists about the present-day Maya. Thus, in the Guatemalan highlands, the 260-day calendar still survives, as do ancient prayers to and information about Maya gods.

It is likely that a simpler religion of nature worship prevailed in Early Formative times. This probably began to undergo modification during the Middle Formative, as astronomical knowledge became more precise. Certainly by the Late Formative (300 BCE, if not earlier), with the appearance of major centres and pyramid and temple constructions, an elaborate worldview had evolved. Deified heavenly bodies and time periods were added to the earlier-conceived corn and rain gods. Concepts derived from priestly speculation were imposed upon the simpler religious beginnings. Religion became increasingly esoteric, with a complex mythology interpreted

by a closely organized priesthood.

The Mayan Calendar

Deciphering Mayan hieroglyphics allowed archaeologists to decipher the Mayan calendar, which, in turn, yielded invaluable insights into the beliefs and practices associated with the Mayan religion. The Mayan calendar is a dating system of the ancient Mayan civilization and the basis for all other calendars used by Mesoamerican civilizations. The calendar was based on a ritual cycle of 260 named days and a year of 365 days. Taken together, they form a longer cycle of 18,980 days, or 52 years of 365 days, called a Calendar Round.

The original name of the 260-day cycle is unknown; it is variously referred to as the Tzolkin ("Count of Days"), divinatory calendar, ritual calendar, or simply the day calendar. Within the Tzolkin are two smaller cycles of days numbered from 1 to 13 and an ordered series of 20 named days. Although the names for the ritual days differed throughout Mesoamerica, scholars believe that the various calendars were synchronized based on their use in divination. In particular, each named day was thought to have certain fateful characteristics, but most of the details have been lost.

Although the ritual day series was synchronized throughout Mesoamerica, the start of the 365-day year varied. The 365-day year was divided into 18 named months (*uinals*) of 20 days, plus one month of 5 "nameless" days, called Uayeb. The nameless days were considered extremely unlucky, causing the Maya to observe them with fasting and sacrifices to deities. Each ordinary day had a fourfold designation—in order, day number and day name in the 260-day cycle and day number within the month and month name in the 365-day cycle. Thus, each of the 18,980 days in the Calendar Round had a unique designation (e.g., 12 Caban 15 Ceh).

The Maya erected stelae—i.e., stone slabs or pillars—on which they carved representative figures and important dates and events in their rulers' lives. To describe a given date more accurately, the Maya instituted the "Long Count," a continuous marking of time from a base date. Most historians think that 4 Ahau 8 Cumku (most likely August 11, 3114 BCE) was the base date used by the Maya for the start of the "Long Count" and the first "Great Cycle," a period of 5,125 years that ends on December 21, 2012 CE.

Discovering Mayan Religious Culture

The major extant Mayan cities and ceremonial centres feature a variety of pyramidal temples or palaces overlaid with limestone blocks and richly ornamented with narrative, ceremonial, and astronomical reliefs and inscriptions that have ensured the stature of Mayan art as premier among Native American cultures. But the true nature of Mayan society, the meaning of its hieroglyphics, and the chronicle of its history remained unknown to scholars for centuries after the Spaniards discovered the ancient Mayan building sites.

Systematic explorations of Mayan sites were first undertaken in the 1830s, and a small portion of the writing system was deciphered in the early and mid-20th century. These discoveries shed some light on Mayan religion, which was based on a pantheon of nature gods, including those of the sun, the moon, rain, and corn. A priestly class was responsible for an elaborate cycle of rituals and ceremonies. Closely related to Mayan religion—indeed, inextricable from it—was the impressive development of mathematics and astronomy. In mathematics, positional notation and the use of the zero represented a pinnacle of intellectual achievement. Mayan astronomy underlay a complex calendrical system involving an accurately determined solar year (18 months of 20 days each, plus a 5-day period considered unlucky by the Mayans), a sacred year of 260 days (13 cycles of 20 named days), and a variety of longer cycles culminating in the Long Count, a continuous marking of time, based on a zero date in 3114 BCE. Mayan astronomers compiled precise tables of positions for the moon and Venus and were able to accurately predict solar eclipses.

Based on these discoveries, scholars in the mid-20th century mistakenly thought that Mayan society was composed of a priestly class of peaceful stargazers and calendar keepers supported by a devout peasantry. The Maya were thought to be utterly absorbed in their religious and cultural pursuits, in favourable contrast to the more warlike and sanguinary indigenous empires of central Mexico. But the progressive decipherment of nearly all of the Mayan hieroglyphic writing has provided a truer if less-elevating picture of Mayan society and culture.

This Late Classic Mayan limestone relief shows a bloodletting ritual performed by the king of Yaxchilán, Shield Jaguar II, and his wife, Lady K'ab'al Xook. The king holds a flaming torch over his wife, who is pulling a thorny rope through her tongue. © Swisshippo/Fotolia

Many of the hieroglyphs depict the histories of the Mayan dynastic rulers,

who waged war on rival Mayan cities and took their aristocrats captive. These captives were then tortured, mutilated, and sacrificed to the gods. Indeed, torture and human sacrifice were fundamental religious rituals of Mayan society; they were thought to guarantee fertility, demonstrate piety, and propitiate the gods, and, if such practices were neglected, cosmic disorder and chaos were thought to result. The drawing of human blood was thought to nourish the gods and was thus necessary to achieve contact with them; hence, the Mayan rulers, as the intermediaries between the Mayan people and the gods, had to undergo ritual bloodletting and self-torture.

Knowledge and Beliefs

On the intellectual, ideological, and religious levels, although diversity and certain elaborations occurred in some regions, there was a fundamental unity to the Mesoamerican area, the product of centuries of political and economic ties. The religion was polytheistic, with numerous gods specialized along the lines of human activities. There were gods for basic activities such as war, reproduction, and agriculture; cosmogenic gods who created the universe and invented human culture; and gods of craft groups, social classes, political systems, and their subdivisions. Gods were all-powerful and had to be constantly propitiated with offerings and sacrifices, a concept reaching its peak in personal bloodletting and human sacrifice. Certain gods, such as the god of rain (called Tlaloc in central Mexico), were found throughout the area.

A fundamental concept was that of a quadripartite multilevel universe that, by 1519, had gone through five creations and four destructions. Mesoamerican religion heavily emphasized the astral bodies, particularly the sun, the moon, and Venus, and the observations of the movement of these bodies by the astronomer-priests were extraordinarily detailed and accurate. The major purpose of these observations was astrological, and the Mesoamerican priests had developed a number of time counts, or calendrical rounds, based in part on these observations. Two basic calendars, a 260-day divinatory calendar and one based on the solar year of 365 days, were found throughout the area.

Classic Maya Religion

It has been denied that there was any such thing as a pantheon of deities in

Classic times, the idea being that the worship of images was introduced by the Toltec or Itzá invaders, or both, in the Postclassic. Several gods who played significant roles in the Postclassic codices, however, can be identified on earlier Maya monuments.

The most important of these is Itzamná, the supreme Maya deity, who functioned as the original creator god, as well as lord of the fire and therefore of the hearth. In his serpent form he appears on the ceremonial bar held in the arms of Maya rulers on Classic stelae. Another ophidian deity recognizable in Classic reliefs is the Feathered Serpent, known to the Maya as Kukulcán (and to the Toltecs and Aztecs as Quetzalcóatl). Probably the most ubiquitous of all is the being known as Bolon Tzacab (first called God K by archaeologists), a deity with a baroquely branching nose who is thought to have functioned as a god of royal descent; he is often held as a kind of sceptre in rulers' hands.

The Classic Maya lavished great attention on their royal dead, who almost surely were thought of as descended from the gods and partaking of their divine essence. Many reliefs and all of the pictorial pottery found in tombs deal with the underworld and the dangerous voyage of the soul through that land. Classic Maya funerary ceramics show that this dark land was ruled by a number of gods, including several sinister old men often embellished with jaguar emblems, the jaguar being associated with the night and the nether regions.

The Classic, as well as the Postclassic, Maya practiced human sacrifice, although not on the scale of the Aztecs. The victims were probably captives, including defeated rulers and nobles. Self-sacrifice or self-mutilation was also common; blood drawn by jabbing spines through the ear or penis, or by drawing a thorn-studded cord through the tongue, was spattered on paper or otherwise collected as an offering to the gods.

Creation

The Maya, like other Middle American Indians, believed that several worlds had been successively created and destroyed before the present universe had come into being. The Dresden Codex holds that the end of a world will come about by deluge: although the evidence derived from Landa's *Relación* and from the Quiché *Popol Vuh* is not clear, it is likely that four worlds preceded the present one. People were made successively of earth (who, being

mindless, were destroyed), then of wood (who, lacking souls and intelligence and being ungrateful to the gods, were punished by being drowned in a flood or devoured by demons), and finally of a corn gruel (the ancestors of the Maya). The Yucatec Maya worshipped a creator deity called Hunab Ku, “One-God.” Itzamná (“Iguana House”), head of the Maya pantheon of the ruling class, was his son, whose wife was Ix Chebel Yax, patroness of weaving.

This engraving depicts the head of the principal Maya god Itzamná carved into a wall in the Mayan city of Izamal. Newberry Library/SuperStock

Four Itzamnás, one assigned to each direction of the universe, were represented by celestial monsters or two-headed, dragonlike iguanas. Four gods, the Bacabs, sustained the sky. Each world direction was associated with a Bacab, a sacred ceiba, or silk cotton tree, a bird, and a colour according to the following scheme: east–red, north–white, west–black, and south–yellow. Green was the colour of the centre.

The main act of creation, as stated in the *Popol Vuh*, was the dawn: the world and humanity were in darkness, but the gods created the sun and the moon. According to other traditions, the sun (male) was the patron of hunting and music, and the moon (female) was the goddess of weaving and childbirth. Both the sun and the moon inhabited the earth originally, but they were translated to the heaven as a result of the moon’s sexual license. Lunar light is less bright than that of the sun because, it was said, one of her eyes

was pulled out by the sun in punishment for her infidelity.

Because the Maya priests had reached advanced knowledge of astronomical phenomena and a sophisticated concept of time, it appears that their esoteric doctrines differed widely from the popular myths.

Cosmology

The Maya believed that 13 heavens were arranged in layers above the earth, which itself rested on the back of a huge crocodile or reptilian monster floating on the ocean. Under the earth were nine underworlds, also arranged in layers. Thirteen gods, the Oxlahuntiku, presided over the heavens; nine gods, the Bolontiku, ruled the subterranean worlds. These concepts are closely akin to those of the Postclassic Aztec, but archaeological evidence, such as the nine deities sculptured on the walls of a 7th-century crypt at Palenque, shows that they were part of the Classic Maya cosmology.

Time was an all-important element of Maya cosmology. The priest-astronomers viewed time as a majestic succession of cycles without beginning or end. All the time periods were considered as gods; time itself was believed to be divine.

Deities

Among the several deities represented by statues and sculptured panels of the Classic Period are such gods as the young corn god, whose gracious statue is to be seen at Copán; the sun god shown at Palenque under the form of the solar disk engraved with anthropomorphic features; the nine gods of darkness (also at Palenque); and a snake god especially prominent at Yaxchilán. Another symbol of the corn god is a foliated cross or life tree represented in two Palenque sanctuaries. The rain god (Chac) has a mask with characteristic protruding fangs, large round eyes, and a proboscis-like nose. Such masks are a common element in Puuc architecture.

The three hieroglyphic manuscripts, especially the Dresden Codex, depict a number of deities whose names are known only through Postclassic documents. Itzamná, lord of the heavens, who ruled over the pantheon, was closely associated with Kinich Ahau, the sun god, and with the moon goddess Ixchel. Though Itzamná was considered an entirely benevolent god, Ixchel, often depicted as an evil old woman, had definitely unfavourable aspects.

The Chacs, the rain gods of the peasants, were believed to pour rain by emptying their gourds and to hurl stone axes upon the earth (the lightning). Their companions were frogs (*uo*), whose croakings announced the rains. Earth gods were worshipped in the highlands, and wind gods were of minor importance in Maya territory.

The corn god, a youthful deity with an ear of corn in his headdress, also ruled over vegetation in general. His name is Ah Mun, and he is sometimes shown in combat with the death god, Ah Puch, a skeleton-like being, patron of the sixth day-sign Cimi (“Death”) and lord of the ninth hell. Several other deities were associated with death—e.g., Ek Chuah, a war god and god of merchants and cacao growers, and Ixtab, patron goddess of the suicides.

This statue is an example of a Mesoamerican sculptural figure known as a chacmool. The figure is shown as reclining, with its head turned at a right angle from the body. Chacmools may represent fallen warriors. They usually supported bowls on their stomach that may have held sacrifices, such as tobacco, feathers, incense, and turkeys, offered to the gods. © Digital Vision/Getty Images

In Postclassic times, central Mexican influences were introduced—e.g., the

Toltec Feathered Serpent (Quetzalcóatl), called Kukulcán in Yucatán and Gucumatz in the Guatemalan highlands.

The ancient Maya's attitude toward the gods was one of humble supplication, since the gods could bestow health, good crops, and plentiful game or send illness and hunger. Prayers and offerings of food, drink, and incense (*pom*) were used to placate the gods. A strong sense of sin and a belief in predestination pervaded the Maya consciousness. Man had to submit to the forces of the universe. The priests, because of their astronomical and divinatory knowledge, determined favourable days for such undertakings as building houses and hunting.

Death

The Classic Maya buried the dead under the floors of their houses. High priests or powerful lords were laid to rest in elaborate underground vaults. The dead were believed to descend to the nine underworlds, called Mitnal in Yucatán and Xibalba by the Quiché. There is no evidence of a belief among the Maya in a heavenly paradise, such as that which prevailed in central Mexico. The modern Lacandón, however, believe that the dead live forever without work or worry in a land of plenty located somewhere above the earth.

THIS IS THE END: MAYAN ESCHATOLOGY

The present world, the Maya believed, is doomed to end in cataclysms as the other worlds have done previously. According to the priestly concept of time, cycles repeat themselves. Therefore, prediction was made possible by probing first into the past and then into the future: hence the calculations, bearing on many millennia, carved on temples and stelae. Evil influences were held to mark most of the *katun* endings. The *Chilam Balam* books are full of predictions of a markedly direful character. The priests probably believed that the present world would come to a sudden end, but that a new world would be created so that the eternal succession of cycles should remain unbroken.

Sacrifice

Sacrifices made in return for divine favour were numerous: animals, birds, insects, fish, agricultural products, flowers, rubber, jade, and blood drawn from the tongue, ears, arms, legs, and genitals. Evidence of human sacrifice

in Classic times includes two Piedras Negras stelae, an incised drawing at Tikal, the murals at Bonampak, various painted ceramic vessels, and some scenes in native manuscripts. Only in the Postclassic era did this practice become as frequent as in central Mexico.

Toltec-Maya art shows many instances of human sacrifice: removal of the heart, arrow shooting, or beheading. At Chichén Itzá, in order to obtain rain, victims were hurled into a deep natural well (cenote) together with copper, gold, and jade offerings. Prayers for material benefits (which were usually recited in a squatting or standing position), fasting and continence (often for 260 days), and the drawing of blood from one's body often preceded important ceremonies and sacrifices.

These practices had become so deeply rooted that, even after the Spanish conquest, Christian-pagan ceremonies occasionally took place in which humans were sacrificed by heart removal or crucifixion. The last recorded case occurred in 1868 among the Chamula of Chiapas.

The Priesthood

Bejeweled, feather-adorned priests are often represented in Classic sculpture. The high priests of each province taught in priestly schools such subjects as history, divination, and glyph writing. The priesthood, as described by Landa, was hereditary. *Ahkin*, "he of the sun," was the priests' general title. Specialized functions were performed by the *nacoms*, who split open the victims' breasts, the *chacs* who held their arms and legs, and the *chilans* who interpreted the sacred books and predicted the future. Some priests used hallucinatory drugs in their roles as prophets and diviners.

Rites

Ritual activities, held on selected favourable days, were complex and intense. Performers submitted to preliminary fasting and sexual abstinence. Features common to most rites were: offerings of incense (*pom*), of balche (an intoxicating drink brewed from honey and a tree bark), bloodletting from ears and tongues, sacrifices of animals (human sacrifices in later times), and dances. Special ceremonies took place on New Year's Day, o Pop, in honour of the "Year-Bearer"—i.e., the *tzolkin* sign of that day. Pottery, clothes, and other belongings were renewed. The second month, Uo, was devoted to

Itzamná, Tzec (fifth month) to the Bacabs, Xul (sixth) to Kukulcán, Yax (10th) to the planet Venus, Mac (13th) to the rain gods, and Muan (15th) to the cocoa-tree god. New idols were made during the eighth and ninth months, Mol and Ch'en, respectively.

Both the Classic and Postclassic Maya practiced a typically Middle American ritual ball game, as evidenced by numerous grandiose ball courts at Tikal, Copán, and Chichén Itzá. No court, however, has been found at Mayapán, and Landa does not mention that game. It appears, therefore, that the Yucatec had ceased to play it, while it remained of the utmost importance in central Mexico.

Archaeological remains at Uxmal and Chichén Itzá point to phallic rites, doubtless imported into the Yucatán from the Gulf Coast. The *Chilam Balam* books strongly condemn the Mexican immigrants' sexual practices, which were quite alien to Maya tradition.

Sorcery

Ahmen, "he who knows," was the name given to sorcerers and medicine men, who were both prophets and inflicters or healers of disease. They made use of a mixture of magic formulas, chants, and prayers and of traditional healing methods, such as administering medicinal herbs or bleeding. Belief in witchcraft is widespread among present-day Maya Indians, as it most probably was in pre-Columbian times. The evolution of Maya religion parallels that of Mexican religions from the Classic to the Postclassic era, with the sun worship and human sacrifice complex gaining importance as it did in Mexico proper.

The profoundly original feature of Maya religious thought, in comparison with that of other pre-Columbian civilizations, is the extraordinary refinement of mathematical and astronomical knowledge, inextricably mixed with mythological concepts. Even the most learned Aztec priests never reached the intellectual level of their Maya counterparts of the 1st millennium, nor did they conceive of the eternity of time and of its "bearers," the divinized time periods. The ancient Maya may be said to have been among the very few people in history (along with the Zurvanites of Iran) who worshipped time.

The simple, naturalistic religion of the corn-growing peasants, however, subsisted apart from the priesthood's abstract speculations and has partly survived to this day among the Christianized Maya Indians or the

unevangelized Lacandón.

AH MUN

The corn god, a youthful deity with an ear of corn in his headdress, also ruled over vegetation in general. His name is Ah Mun, and he is sometimes shown in combat with the death god, Ah Puch, a skeleton-like being, patron of the sixth day-sign Cimi (“Death”) and lord of the ninth hell.

AH PUCH

The death god, a skeleton-like being, is patron of the sixth day-sign Cimi (“Death”) and lord of the ninth hell. Mayan death gods were known under various names. They were typically lords of the underworld and served as a sort of opposite counterpart to the upper, or celestial, god in the creation of the world and of the human body and soul. Along with the death gods, many were-animals and spooks inhabited the underworld. Sometimes the death gods were depicted as head hunters or deer hunters.

BACAB

The Bacab, in Mayan mythology, are any of four gods, thought to be brothers, who, with upraised arms, supported the multilayered sky from their assigned positions at the four cardinal points of the compass. (The Bacabs may also have been four manifestations of a single deity.) The four brothers were probably the offspring of Itzamná, the supreme deity, and Ixchel, the goddess of weaving, medicine, and childbirth. Each Bacab presided over one year of the four-year cycle. The Maya expected the Muluc years to be the

greatest years because the god presiding over these years was the greatest of the Bacab gods. The four directions and their corresponding colours (east, red; north, white; west, black; south, yellow) played an important part in the Mayan religious and calendrical systems.

This is a copy of an original Bacab face carved into volcanic rock that was found at a Mayan temple in Honduras. DEA/G. Dagli Orti/De Agostini/ Getty Image

BOLONTIKU

The Bolontiku are the nine gods who rule over the subterranean worlds.

CHAC

Like other major Mayan gods, Chac also appeared as four gods, the Chacs. The four gods were associated with the points of the compass and their

colours: white, north; red, east; black, west; and yellow, south. At Chichén Itzá, in Postclassic times, human sacrifice became associated with the rain god, and the priests who held the arms and legs of the sacrificial victims were termed *chacs*.

In Postclassic Mayan and Toltec ruins, reclining figures known as the Chacs Mool are thought to represent the rain god. Following the Spanish conquest, the Chacs were associated with Christian saints and were often depicted on horseback. Chac is often depicted as bearing a lightning axe with which he strikes the clouds to produce thunder and rain. Chac is close kin to the Aztec god of rain, Tlaloc. Ceremonial banquets were held for Chac to encourage him to provide rain. Sometimes sacrificial victims, usually young men and women, were lowered into wells and drowned in order to forge a productive connection with the rain god.

CIZIN

Cizin may possibly have been one aspect of a malevolent underworld deity who manifested himself under several names and guises (e.g., Ah Puch, Xibalba, and Yum Cimil). In pre-conquest codices, or manuscripts, the god of death is frequently depicted with the god of war in scenes of human sacrifice. One aspect of the dualistic nature of the Mayan religion is symbolically portrayed in the existing codices, which show Cizin uprooting or destroying trees planted by Chac, the rain god. Cizin is often depicted on pottery and illustrated in the codices in the form of a dancing skeleton, holding a smoking cigarette. He is also known by his death collar, the most prominent feature of which consists of disembodied eyes dangling by their nerve cords. After the Spanish conquest, Cizin became merged with the Christian devil.

This page from the Mayan Codex of Madrid shows Cizin, the god of death, beating the celestial Snake with his axe to provoke rain. Apic/Hulton Archive/Getty Images

HUNAB KU

Hunab Ku is the creator deity (“One-God”) worshipped by the Yucatec Maya.

ITZAMNÁ

Itzamná (Mayan: “Iguana House”) is the principal pre-Columbian Mayan deity, ruler of heaven, day, and night. He frequently appeared as four gods called Itzamnás, who encased the world. Like some of the other Mesoamerican deities, the Itzamnás were associated with the points of the compass and their colours (east, red; north, white; west, black; and south, yellow).

Itzamná was sometimes identified with the remote creator deity Hunab Ku and occasionally with Kinich Ahau, the sun god. The moon goddess Ixchel,

patron of womanly crafts, was possibly a female manifestation of the god. Itzamná was also a culture hero who gave humankind writing and the calendar and was patron deity of medicine.

Ixchel

Ixchel, also spelled Ix Chel, is the Mayan moon goddess. Ixchel was the patroness of womanly crafts but was often depicted as an evil old woman and had unfavorable aspects. She may have been a manifestation of the god Itzamná.

Kinich Ahau

Kinich Ahau is the Mayan sun god. He is usually depicted as a middle-aged man with a hooked nose, large and crossed eyes, and a sharpened incisor in the upper row of his teeth. He was the patron of one of the four years of the fifty-two-year cycle, and he may have been viewed as an aspect of the upper, or celestial, god Itzamná. According to some legends, he is the brother of Itzamná, and he will bring about the destruction of the world by descending from the sky and unleashing his jaguars on humankind.

Kukulcán/Quetzatcóatl

Kukulcán (equivalent to the Aztec Quetzatcóatl) is the Feathered Serpent, one of the major deities of the ancient Mexican pantheon. Representations of a feathered snake occur as early as the Teotihuacán civilization (3rd to 8th century CE) on the central plateau. At that time, Kukulcán/Quetzalcóatl seems to have been conceived as a vegetation god—an earth and water deity closely associated with the rain god Tlaloc.

OXLAHUNTIKU

The Oxlahuntiku are the 13 gods who preside over the heavens.

CHAPTER 3

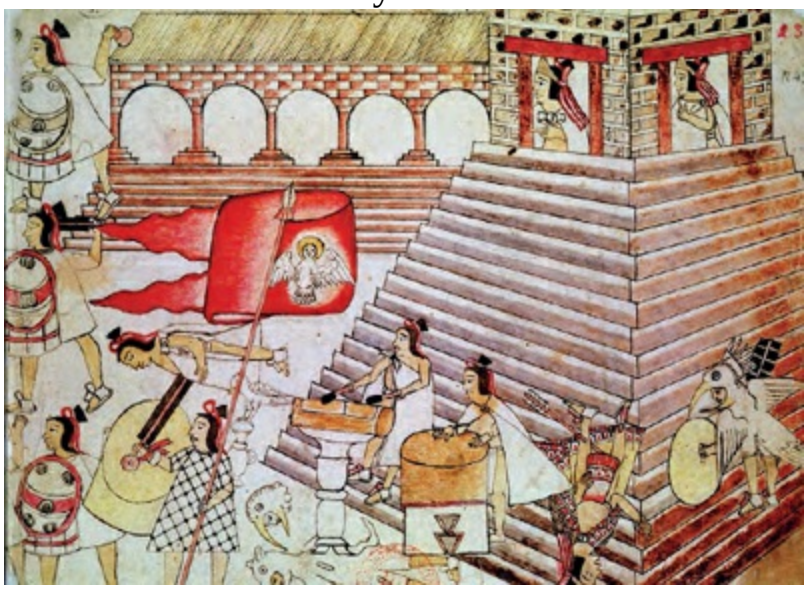
THE CULTURE, RELIGION, AND DEITIES OF THE AZTEC

The Aztec were Nahuatl-speaking people who in the 15th and early 16th centuries ruled a large empire in what is now central and southern Mexico. The Aztec are so called from Aztlán (“White Land”), an allusion to their origins, probably in northern Mexico. They were also called the Tenochca, from an eponymous ancestor, Tenoch, and the Mexica, probably from Metzliapán (“Moon Lake”), the mystical name for Lake Texcoco. From “Tenochca” was derived the name of their great city, Tenochtitlán; and from “Mexica” came the name for the city that superseded the Aztec capital and for the surrounding valley, which was applied later to the whole Mexican nation. The Aztec referred to themselves as Culhua-Mexica, to link themselves with Colhuacán, the centre of the most civilized people of the Valley of Mexico.

The origin of the Aztec people is uncertain, but elements of their own tradition suggest that they were a tribe of hunters and gatherers on the northern Mexican plateau before their appearance in Mesoamerica in perhaps the 12th century CE; Aztlán, however, may be legendary. It is possible that their migration southward was part of a general movement of peoples that followed, or perhaps helped trigger, the collapse of the Toltec civilization. They settled on islands in Lake Texcoco and in 1325 founded Tenochtitlán, which remained their chief centre. The basis of the Aztec’s success in creating a great state and ultimately an empire was their remarkable system of agriculture, which featured intensive cultivation of all available land, as well as elaborate systems of irrigation and reclamation of swampland. The high productivity gained by these methods made for a rich and populous state.

Under the ruler Itzcóatl (1428–40), Tenochtitlán formed alliances with the neighbouring states of Texcoco and Tlacopan and became the dominant power in central Mexico. Later, by commerce and conquest, Tenochtitlán came to rule an empire of 400 to 500 small states, comprising by 1519 some

5 to 6 million people spread over 80,000 square miles (207,200 square km). At its height, Tenochtitlán itself covered more than 5 square miles (13 square km) and had upwards of 140,000 inhabitants, making it the most densely populated settlement ever achieved by a Mesoamerican civilization.



Aztec warriors defend the Temple of Tenochtitlán. Photos.com/Thinkstock

The Aztec state was a despotism in which the military arm played a dominant role. Valour in war was, in fact, the surest path to advancement in Aztec society, which was caste- and class-divided but nonetheless vertically fluid. The priestly and bureaucratic classes were involved in the administration of the empire, while at the bottom of society were classes of serfs, indentured servants, and outright slaves.

From Myth to Empire: The Rise of the Aztec

The empire the Aztec established was equaled in the New World only by that of the Incas of Peru, and the brilliance of their civilization is comparable to that of other great ancient cultures of America and the Old World. From their legendary land of Aztlán, the Aztec came into contact with the highly developed Toltec civilization of central Mexico and its capital, Tula, a magnificent urban centre with pyramids, temples, public buildings, statuary, private residences, and ball courts. The appearance of the Aztec is linked, however, not to the splendour of Tula and of the Toltec but to their decline.

For reasons not fully known but having to do with internal social, political, and religious conflicts, a tremendous cultural catastrophe occurred at the beginning of the 12th century CE. The city of Tula was attacked and destroyed, as were other important Toltec centres. Tribes of hunters and gatherers took advantage of the situation and added to the chaos, traveling from the arid plateau of northern Mexico toward the fertile, heavily settled central zone. Among them were the Acolhua in the 1100s and, in the 1200s, the Chichimec, who settled at Tenayuca; the Otomí, who took control of Xaltocan; the Tepanec, who conquered Atzcapotzalco; and the Aztec. Except for the Otomí, all were Nahuatl speakers.

According to Aztec legend, from the beginning of the 12th century to the beginning of the 13th, the Aztec wandered in search of a new place to settle. During that time a group of Chichimec, under the leadership of Xólotl, established a capital in Tenayuca and later in Texcoco. Xólotl's Chichimec joined forces with the remaining Toltec, who were firmly entrenched in Culhuacán. Apparently, this confederation led to a period of relative peace and cultural progress in the Valley of Mexico. During this time the Aztec established a precarious home near the ruins of Tula, where they improved their agricultural methods and other technological knowledge. But their stay was temporary. Aztec tradition has it that the god Huitzilopochtli ordered them to leave again in search of a permanent home, which would be indicated by an eagle perched on a nopal cactus with a serpent in its beak.

Their long pilgrimage ended in the year of "two house," according to their calendar (1325 CE). On a small island in Lake Texcoco, elder members of the tribe spotted the eagle, the cactus, and the serpent. There they built a temple and, around it, the first dwellings of what was to become the powerful city of Tenochtitlán. Five centuries later the capital city's foundation story would be depicted and memorialized on Mexico's national flag.

The swamp-surrounded island on which the Aztec took refuge was so uninviting that none of the powers in the Valley of Mexico had claimed it. Tenochtitlán was thus located at the edge of the lands occupied by the valley's three powers: the Chichimec of Texcoco, the Toltec of Culhuacán, and the Tepanec of Atzcapotzalco. It was not long before the Aztec used their strategic position to advantage by aiding the Tepanec in a war of expansion against the Toltec, the Chichimec, and other neighbouring peoples. And by 1428 the Aztecs' ruler, Itzcóatl ("Obsidian Snake"), and his chief adviser, Tlacaelel, led the Aztec in conquering their old allies and overlords. Under a

succession of ambitious kings in the 15th century, the Aztec established a dominion that eventually stretched over most of present-day Mexico.

The Three Keys to Aztec Success in Empire-Building

The almost incredible story of a small wandering tribe that was able to build an empire in one century (from the beginning of the 14th century to the beginning of the 15th) can be largely explained by three main factors: Aztec religion, the economy of the Valley of Mexico, and Aztec sociopolitical organization.

Aztec religion centred around the fierce sun god Huitzilopochtli. After battling his way across the sky each day, he returned to the bosom of the earth, his mother (Coatlicue), where he renewed his strength in order to take up the fight against darkness. In order to guarantee human existence, the Aztec, as “people of the sun,” had to nourish Huitzilopochtli with human blood. For them war was therefore a religious obligation that provided prisoners who could be sacrificed to the sun god. As their power grew, the Aztec ritually murdered prisoners from all parts of what is now Mexico in Tenochtitlán, often by ripping their still-beating hearts from their chests.

The economic basis of the Aztec hegemony was the Valley of Mexico’s agriculture, characterized for several centuries by irrigation systems and *chinampas*, the misnamed “floating gardens” that were actually a raised-field system of agriculture. Rich soil from the bottom of a lake was piled up to form ridges between rows of ditches or canals. With the mild climate and ample water for irrigation, the *chinampas* yielded multiple harvests each year. The high productivity of the systems resulted in a heavy density of population in the Valley of Mexico and the development of large urban centres. In the early 16th century the population of the valley may have fluctuated around 2,000,000, with some cities approaching or exceeding 100,000. Because of this enormous concentration of population and economic resources, the Valley of Mexico became the key to power in the central part of the country.

This manuscript image depicts the construction of the city of Tenochtitlán, partly through the use of chinampas*, or "floating gardens," which strengthened and stabilized the land.* DEA/G. Dagli Orti/De Agostini/ Getty Image

From very early times, another factor contributed to the strategic importance of the Valley of Mexico: a system of lakes (Texcoco, Chalco, Xochimilco, Xaltoca, and Zumpango) that were connected naturally and by means of artificial canals. Extensive water transportation on the lakes compensated for the lack of the wheel and of domesticated pack animals and, in no small measure, furthered the early economic and political unification of the valley.

All these factors served as powerful stimuli to trade. Probably in keeping with an ancient tradition, the merchants (*pochteca*) of Aztec society were organized in powerful guilds, which even started wars on their own and sent trading expeditions as far as Central America. It was on the basis of the geographic data collected by their merchants, often wandering through hostile territory, that the Aztec drew up maps not only for economic purposes but for military use as well.

The third essential factor in Aztec imperialism was the empire's complex sociopolitical organization, the levels and functions of which were poorly understood by Spanish chroniclers (and continue to be debated among anthropologists). For example, the division of the tribe into *calpulli* ("big houses"), pseudo family units established in Tenochtitlán, has sometimes been interpreted as proof of an egalitarian organization. Yet, evidence of

social stratification is indisputable. Aztec society has also been interpreted as "feudal." This assertion is based on the existence of an Aztec hereditary nobility. Nevertheless, the relation of these noble groups to the Aztec kings, to the rest of society, and to land ownership was distinct from Old World feudalism, partly because the Aztec monarch's rule was more absolute.

During the reign of Montezuma II, the ninth Aztec king (1502–20), Aztec officials produced codices that recorded the organization of the empire into provinces and the payment of tribute according to the production of each region. A gigantic political, military, and religious bureaucracy was built up, with governors, tax collectors, courts of justice, military garrisons, mail and messenger services, and other civil offices. Along with their feverish efforts at political organization, the Aztecs had the strength to subjugate their allies, Texcoco and Tacuba, and to undertake new campaigns as far south as Central America.

The Aztec empire was still expanding, and its society still evolving, when its progress was halted in 1519 by the appearance of Spanish explorers. Montezuma II, was taken prisoner by Hernán Cortés and died in custody. His successors, Cuitláhuac and Cuauhtémoc, were unable to stave off Cortés and his forces, and, with the Spanish capture of Tenochtitlán in 1521, the Aztec empire came to an end.

The Aztec Calendar

The Aztec calendar is a dating system based on the Mayan calendar and used in the Valley of Mexico before the destruction of the Aztec empire. Like the Mayan calendar, the Aztec calendar consisted of a ritual cycle of 260 days and a 365-day civil cycle. The ritual cycle, or *tonalpohualli*, contained two smaller cycles, an ordered sequence of 20 named days and a sequence of days numbered from 1 to 13. The 13-day cycle was particularly important for religious observance, and each of the 20 numbered cycles within the ritual year was associated with a different deity. Similarly, each named day was associated with a unique deity, and scholars believe that the combinations of ruling deities were used for divination. The civil year was divided into 18 months of 20 days each, plus an additional 5 days called *nemontemi* and considered to be very unlucky.

Again as in the Mayan calendar, the Aztec ritual and civil cycles returned to the same positions relative to each other every 52 years, an event

celebrated as the Binding Up of the Years, or the New Fire Ceremony. In preparation, all sacred and domestic fires were allowed to burn out. At the climax of the ceremony, priests ignited a new sacred fire on the breast of a sacrificial victim, from which the people rekindled their hearth fires and began feasting.

Specialized priests called *tonalpouhque* interpreted the signs and numbers on such occasions as birth, marriage, departure of traders to faraway lands, and election of rulers. Each day and each 13-day series were deemed lucky, unlucky, or indifferent according to the deities presiding over them. Thus Ce-Coatl (“One-Snake”) was held as favourable to the traders, Chicome-Xochitl (“Seven-Flower”) to the scribes and the weavers, and Nahui-Ehécatl (“Four-Wind”) to the magicians. The men who were born during the Ce-Ocelotl (“One-Jaguar”) series would die on the sacrificial stone, those whose birth took place on the day Ometochtli (“Two-Rabbit”) would be drunkards, and so on. The *tonalpohualli* dominated every aspect of public and private life.

This Aztec calendar, known as the Stone of the Sun, once resided in Tenochtitlán. DEA/G. Dagli Orti/De Agostini/ Getty Image

A circular calendar stone measuring about 12 feet (3.7 metres) in diameter and weighing some 25 tons was uncovered in Mexico City in 1790 and is currently on display in the National Museum of Anthropology in Mexico City. The face of the Aztec sun god, Tonatiuh, appears at the centre of the stone, surrounded by four square panels honouring previous incarnations of

the deity that represent the four previous ages of the world. Circumscribing these are signs that represent the 20 days of the Aztec month.

THE NEW FIRE CEREMONY

The New Fire Ceremony, also called the Binding Up of the Years, in Aztec religion, was a ritual celebrated every 52 years when the 260-day ritual and 365-day civil calendars returned to the same positions relative to each other. In preparation, all sacred and domestic fires were allowed to burn out. At the climax of the ceremony, priests ignited a new sacred fire on the breast of a sacrificial victim, from which the rest of the people rekindled their hearth fires; the people then began feasting.

Aztec Religion

Perhaps the most highly elaborated aspect of Aztec culture was the religious system. Aztec religion was syncretistic, absorbing elements from many other Mesoamerican cultures. At base, it shared many of the cosmological beliefs of earlier peoples, notably the Maya, such as that the present earth was the last in a series of creations and that it occupied a position between systems of 13 heavens and 9 underworlds.

Prominent in the Aztec pantheon were Huitzilopochtli, god of war; Tonatiuh, god of the sun; Tlaloc, god of rain; and Quetzalcóatl, the Feathered Serpent, who was part deity and part culture hero. Human sacrifice, particularly by offering a victim’s heart to the sun god, was commonly practiced, as was bloodletting.

Closely entwined with Aztec religion was the calendar, on which the elaborate round of rituals and ceremonies that occupied the priests was based. The Aztec calendar was the one common to much of Mesoamerica, and it comprised a solar year of 365 days and a sacred year of 260 days; the two yearly cycles running in parallel produced a larger cycle of 52 years.

Because the Aztec derived much of their religious ideology from the earlier cultures of Mesoamerica or from their contemporaries a lot of confusion about Aztec religious ideology has stemmed, in part, from the fact that Aztec civilization was still in a process of assimilation and reorganization of these varied religious traditions. Moreover, as the empire expanded and Tenochtitlán evolved into a heterogeneous community, the religious needs correspondingly changed from those of a simple agrarian

society. The ruling class, particularly, demanded a more intellectual and philosophical ideology.

The Aztec approach to contact with the supernatural was through a complex calendar of great ceremonies, which were held at the temples and were performed by a professional priesthood that acted as the intermediary between the gods and human beings. Many of these were public in the sense that the populace played the role of spectators. Elements in all the ceremonies were very similar and included ritual ablutions to prepare the priests for the contact; offerings and sacrifices to gain the gods' favour; and theatrical dramas of myths by masked performers in the form of dances, songs, and processionals. Each god had his special ceremony that, considering the richness of the pantheon, must have filled the calendar. These ceremonies must have played a significant recreative function, as do ceremonies held in honour of patron saints in present-day Mexico.

An illustration from a reproduction of the Codex Magliabecchi depicts an Aztec priest performing a sacrificial offering of a living human heart to the war god Huitzilopochtli. Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. (neg. no. LC-USZC4-743)

Aztec religion heavily emphasized sacrifice and ascetic behaviour as the necessary preconditions for approaching the supernatural. Priests were celibate and were required to live a simple, spartan life. They performed constant self-sacrifice in the form of bloodletting as penitence (by passing barbed cords through the tongue and ears). This pattern of worship reached its climax in the practice of human sacrifice; it was in this aspect of Aztec

culture that religion, war, and politics became closely related. Ideologically at least, Aztec warfare was waged for the purpose of obtaining sacrificial victims. The tribute lists, of course, demonstrate that there was a more mundane purpose as well, and it would be a serious mistake to think of Aztec warfare as functioning primarily in the religious sphere.

The cult of the gods required a large professional priesthood. Spanish documents indicate that the priesthood was one of the most elaborate of Aztec institutions. Each temple and god had its attendant priestly order. At Tenochtitlán the high priests of Tlaloc and Huitzilopochtli served as heads of the entire priestly organization. Within the orders were priests in charge of ceremonies, of the education of novices, of astrology, and of the temple lands. (These consisted of specific rural communities assigned by the state to particular temples.) Furthermore, there were several grades of priests. The priests maintained a number of schools, or *calmecacs*, where sons of the nobility and certain commoners were given instruction. Most of the novices ultimately left the priesthood and carried out economic and political functions; others remained, joined the priesthood on a permanent basis, and lived at the *calmecac*.

Much of Aztec religion probably was practiced at home at special household altars. Common archaeological artifacts are small baked-clay idols or figurines, representing specific gods apparently used in these household ceremonies, along with incense burners.

Cosmogony and Eschatology

The Aztec believed that four worlds had existed before the present universe. Those worlds, or “suns,” had been destroyed by catastrophes. Humankind had been entirely wiped out at the end of each sun. The present world was the fifth sun, and the Aztec thought of themselves as “the People of the Sun.” Their divine duty was to wage cosmic war in order to provide the sun with his *tlaxcaltiliztli* (“nourishment”). Without it the sun would disappear from the heavens. Thus the welfare and the very survival of the universe depended upon the offerings of blood and hearts to the sun, a notion that the Aztec extended to all the deities of their pantheon.

The first sun was called Nahui-Ocelotl, “Four-Jaguar,” a date of the ritual calendar. Humankind was first destroyed by jaguars. The animal was considered by the Aztec as the *nahualli* (“animal disguise”) of the creator god

Tezcatlipoca. At the end of the second sun, Nahui-Ehécatl, “Four-Wind,” a magical hurricane transformed all people into monkeys. That disaster was caused by Quetzalcóatl (the Feathered Serpent) in the form of Ehécatl, the wind god. A rain of fire had put an end to the third sun, Nahuiquiahuitl, “Four-Rain.” Tlaloc as the god of thunder and lightning presided over that period. The fourth sun, Nahui-Atl, “Four-Water,” ended in a gigantic flood that lasted for 52 years. Only one man and one woman survived, sheltered in a huge cypress. But they were changed into dogs by Tezcatlipoca, whose orders they had disobeyed.

Present humanity was created by Quetzalcóatl. The Feathered Serpent, with the help of his twin, Xólotl, the dog-headed god, succeeded in reviving the dried bones of the old dead by sprinkling them with his own blood. The present sun was called Nahui-Ollin, “Four-Earthquake,” and was doomed to disappear in a tremendous earthquake. The skeleton-like monsters of the west, the *tzitzimime*, would then appear and kill all people.

Two deeply rooted concepts are revealed by these myths. One was the belief that the universe was unstable, that death and destruction continually threatened it. The other emphasized the necessity of the sacrifice of the gods. Thanks to Quetzalcóatl’s self-sacrifice, the ancient bones of Mictlan, “the Place of Death,” gave birth to men. In the same way, the sun and moon were created: the gods, assembled in the darkness at Teotihuacán, built a huge fire; two of them, Nanahuatzin, a small deity covered with ulcers, and Tecciztécatl, a richly bejeweled god, threw themselves into the flames, from which the former emerged as the sun and the latter as the moon. Then the sun refused to move unless the other gods gave him their blood; they were compelled to sacrifice themselves to feed the sun.

Cosmology

According to the Aztec cosmological ideas, the earth had the general shape of a great disk divided into four sections oriented to the four cardinal directions. To each of the four world directions were attached five of the 20 day-signs, one of them being a Year-Bearer (east, *acatl*, “reed”; west, *calli*, “house”; north, *tecpatl*, “flint knife”; south, *tochtli*, “rabbit”), a colour (east, red or green; west, white; north, black; south, blue), and certain gods. The fifth cardinal point, the centre, was attributed to the fire god Huehuetéotl because the hearth stood at the centre of the house.

Above the earth, which was surrounded by the "heavenly water" (*ilhuicáatl*) of the ocean, were 13 heavens, the uppermost of which, "where the air is delicate and frozen," was the abode of the Supreme Couple. Under the "divine earth," *teotlalli*, were the nine hells of Mictlan, with nine rivers that the souls of the dead had to cross. Thirteen was considered a favourable number, nine extremely unlucky.

GODS IN THE HEAVENS

All of the heavenly bodies and constellations were divinized, such as the Great Bear (Tezcatlipoca), Venus (Quetzalcóatl), the stars of the north (Centzon Mimixcoa, "the 400 Cloud-Serpents"), the stars of the south (Centzon Huitznáua, "the 400 Southerners"). The solar disk, Tonatiuh, was supposed to be borne on a litter from the east to the zenith, surrounded by the souls of dead warriors, and from the zenith to the west among a retinue of divinized women, the Cihuateteo. When the night began on the earth, day dawned in Mictlan, the abode of the dead.

DEITIES

The ancient tribes of central Mexico had worshipped fertility gods for many centuries when the Aztec invaded the valley. The cult of these gods remained extremely important in Aztec religion.

Tlaloc, the giver of rain but also the wrathful deity of lightning, was the leader of a group of rain gods, the Tlaloques, who dwelt on mountaintops. Chalchiuhtlicue ("One Who Wears a Jade Skirt") presided over fresh waters; Huixtocíhuatl, over salt waters and the sea.

Numerous earth goddesses were associated with the fertility of the soil and with the fecundity of women, as Teteoinnan ("Mother of the Gods"), Coatlicue ("One Who Wears a Snake Skirt"), Cihuacóatl ("Serpent-Woman"), and Itzpapálotl ("Obsidian-Butterfly"). Their significance was twofold: as fertility deities, they gave birth to the young gods of corn, Centéotl, and of flowers, Xochipilli; as symbols of the earth that devoured the bodies and drank the blood, they appeared as warlike godheads. Tlazoltéotl, a Huastec goddess, presided over carnal love and over the confession of sins.

This ceramic pot is shaped in the image of Tlaloc, the Aztec god of rain and fertility. Ronaldo Schemidt/AFP/Getty Images

Xipe Totec, borrowed from the faraway Yopi people, was a god of the spring, of the renewal of vegetation, and at the same time the god of the corporation of goldsmiths. Human victims were killed and flayed to honour him.

The concept of a Supreme Couple played an important role in the religion of the old sedentary peoples such as the Otomí. Among the Aztec it took the form of Intonan, Intota ("Our Mother, Our Father"), the earth and the sun. But the fire god Huehuetéotl was also associated with the earth. In addition, Ometecuhtli ("Lord of the Duality") and Omecihuatl ("Lady of the Duality") were held to abide in the 13th heaven: they decided on which date a human being would be born, thus determining his destiny.

Among the fertility gods are to be counted the "400 Rabbits" (Centzon Totochtin), little gods of the crops, among which are Ometochtli, the god of *octli* (a fermented drink), and Tepoztécatl, the god of drunkenness.

The Aztec brought with them the cult of their sun and war god, Huitzilopochtli, "the Hummingbird of the Left," who was considered "the reincarnated Warrior of the South," the conquering sun of midday. According to a legend probably borrowed from the Toltec, he was born near Tula. His

mother, the earth goddess Coatlicue, had already given birth to the 400 Southerners and to the night goddess Coyolxauhqui, whom the newborn god exterminated with his *xiuhcoatl* (“turquoise serpent”).

Tezcatlipoca, god of the night sky, was the protector of the young warriors. Quetzalcóatl, the ancient Teotihuacán deity of vegetation and fertility, had been “astralized” and transformed into a god of the morning star. He was also revered as a wind god and as the ancient priest-king of the Toltec golden age: the discoveries of writing, the calendar, and the arts were attributed to him.

Mythology of Death and Afterlife

The beliefs of the Aztec concerning the other world and life after death showed the same syncretism. The old paradise of the rain god Tlaloc, depicted in the Teotihuacán frescoes, opened its gardens to those who died by drowning, lightning, or as a result of leprosy, dropsy, gout, or lung diseases. He was supposed to have caused their death and to have sent their souls to paradise.

Two categories of dead persons went up to the heavens as companions of the sun: the Quauhteca (“Eagle People”), who comprised the warriors who died on the battlefield or on the sacrificial stone, and the merchants who were killed while traveling in faraway places; and the women who died while giving birth to their first child and thus became Cihuateteo, “Divine Women.”

All the other dead went down to Mictlan, under the northern deserts, the abode of Mictlantecuhtli, the skeleton-masked god of death. There they traveled for four years until they arrived at the ninth hell, where they disappeared altogether.

Offerings were made to the dead 80 days after the funeral, then one, two, three, and four years later. Then all links between the dead and the living was severed. But the warriors who crossed the heavens in the retinue of the sun were thought to come back to earth after four years as hummingbirds. The Cihuateteo were said to appear at night at the crossroads and strike the passersby with palsy.

Worldview

The world vision of the Aztec conceded only a small part to man in the scheme of things. His destiny was submitted to the all-powerful *tonalpohualli*

(the calendrical round); his life in the other world did not result from any moral judgment. His duty was to fight and die for the gods and for the preservation of the world order. Moreover, witchcraft, omens, and portents dominated everyday life. That such a pessimistic outlook should have coexisted with the wonderful dynamism of Aztec civilization is in itself a remarkable achievement.

CENTZON TOTOCHTIN

The Aztec fertility deities Centzon Totochtin ("400 Rabbits") were little gods of the crops, among which are Ometochtli, the god of *octli* (a fermented drink), and Tepoztécatl, the god of drunkenness.

CHALCHIUHTLICUE

Chalchiuhtlicue, also spelled Chalchihuitlicue (Nahuatl: "She Who Wears a Jade Skirt") and also called Matlalcueye ("She Who Wears a Green Skirt"), is the Aztec goddess of rivers, lakes, streams, and other freshwaters. Wife (in some myths, sister) of the rain god Tlaloc, in Aztec cosmology she ruled over the fourth of the previous suns; in her reign, maize (corn) was first used. Like other water deities, she was often associated with serpents. She is not to be confused with Huixtocihuatl (Salt Lady), the goddess of salt water, of the salters guild, and of dissolute women.

COATLICUE

Coatlicue (Nahuatl: "Serpent Skirt") is an Aztec earth goddess, symbol of the earth as both creator and destroyer, mother of the gods and mortals.

The dualism that she embodies is powerfully concretized in her image: her face is of two fanged serpents and her skirt is of interwoven snakes (snakes symbolize fertility); her breasts are flabby (she nourished many); her necklace is of hands, hearts, and a skull (she feeds on corpses, as the earth consumes all that dies); and her fingers and toes are claws. Called also Teteoinnan (“Mother of the Gods”) and Toci (“Our Grandmother”), she is a single manifestation of the earth goddess, a multifaceted being who also appears as the fearsome goddess of childbirth, Cihuacóatl (“Snake Woman”; like Coatlicue, called Tonantzin [“Our Mother”]), and as Tlazoltéotl, the goddess of sexual impurity and wrongful behaviour.

This stone sculpture depicts Coatlicue, the Aztec goddess of life and death. Ronaldo Schemidt/AFP/Getty Images

COYOLXAUHQUI

Coyolxauhqui is the Aztec night goddess whom the newborn god Huitzilopochtli exterminated with his *xiuh coatl* (“turquoise serpent”).

HUEHUETÉOTL

Huehuetéotl is a fire god and is also associated with the earth. He is often associated with Xiuhtecuhtil, the Aztec god of fire, day, and heat. He is depicted as an elderly, decrepit man with a beard, unlike Xiuhtecuhtil, who is portrayed as youthful and powerful. Huehuetéotl would be offered sacrifices by young boys of small swamp creatures like snakes, lizards, and frogs. In return, the boys would receive food from the priests. Other times, Huehuetéotl would be appeased by the burning of human hearts, blood and fire being the god’s two most important elements.

HUITZILOPOCHTLI

Huitzilopochtli, also spelled Uitzilopochtli, is the Aztec sun and war god, one of the two principal deities of Aztec religion, often represented in art as either a hummingbird or an eagle. Huitzilopochtli’s name is a cognate of the Nahuatl words *huitzilin*, “hummingbird,” and *opochtli*, “left.” Aztec believed that dead warriors were reincarnated as hummingbirds and considered the south to be the left side of the world; thus, his name meant the “resuscitated warrior of the south.” His other names included Xiuhpilli (“Turquoise Prince”) and Totec (“Our Lord”). His *nagual*, or animal disguise, was the eagle.

Huitzilopochtli’s mother, Coatlicue, is one aspect of the Aztec’s multidimensional earth goddess; she conceived him after having kept in her bosom a ball of hummingbird feathers (i.e., the soul of a warrior) that fell from the sky. According to tradition, Huitzilopochtli was born on Coatepec Mountain, near the city of Tula.

Huitzilopochtli’s brothers, the stars of the southern sky (Centzon Huitznáua, “Four Hundred Southerners”), and his sister Coyolxauhqui, a

moon goddess, decided to kill him. He foiled their plot and exterminated them with his weapon, the *xiuh cóatl* (“turquoise snake”).

Huitzilopochtli is presented as the deity who guided the long migration the Aztec undertook from Aztlan, their traditional home, to the Valley of Mexico. During the journey his image, in the form of a hummingbird, was carried upon the shoulders of priests, and at night his voice was heard giving orders. Thus, according to Huitzilopochtli’s command, Tenochtitlán, the Aztec capital, was founded in 1325 CE on a small, rocky island in the lake of the Valley of Mexico. The god’s first shrine was built on the spot where priests found an eagle poised upon a rock and devouring a snake, an image so important to Mexican culture that it is portrayed on the national flag of Mexico. Successive Aztec rulers enlarged the shrine until the year Eight Reed (1487), when an impressive temple was dedicated by the emperor Ahuitzotl.

This codex illustration depicts a ritual of blood offerings to Huitzilopochtli, the Aztec god of the sun and of war. Album/Art Resource, NY

The Aztec believed that the sun god needed daily nourishment (*tlaxcaltiliztli*) in the form of human blood and hearts and that they, as “people of the sun,” were required to provide Huitzilopochtli with his sustenance. The sacrificial hearts were offered to the sun *quauhtlehuanitl* (“eagle who rises”) and burned in the *quauhxicalli* (“the eagle’s vase”). Warriors who died in battle or as sacrifices to Huitzilopochtli were called *quauhteca* (“the eagle’s people”). It was believed that after their death the

warriors first formed part of the sun's brilliant retinue; then after four years they went to live forever in the bodies of hummingbirds.

Huitzilopochtli's high priest, the Quetzalcóatl Totec Tlamacazqui ("Feathered Serpent, Priest of Our Lord"), was, with the god Tlaloc's high priest, one of the two heads of the Aztec clergy. The 15th month of the ceremonial year Panquetzaliztli ("Feast of the Flags of Precious Feathers") was dedicated to Huitzilopochtli and to his lieutenant Paynal ("He Who Hastens," so named because the priest who impersonated him ran while leading a procession around the city). During the month, warriors and *auianime* (courtesans) danced night after night on the plaza in front of the god's temple. War prisoners or slaves were bathed in a sacred spring at Huitzilopochco (modern Churubusco, near Mexico City) and were then sacrificed during or after Paynal's procession. The priests also burned a huge bark-paper serpent symbolizing the god's primary weapon. Finally, an image of Huitzilopochtli, made of ground maize (corn), was ceremonially killed with an arrow and divided between the priests and the novices; the young men who ate "Huitzilopochtli's body" were obliged to serve him for one year.

Representations of Huitzilopochtli usually show him as a hummingbird or as a warrior with armour and helmet made of hummingbird feathers. In a pattern similar to that found in many hummingbirds, his legs, arms, and the lower part of his face were painted one colour (blue) and the upper half of his face was another (black). He wore an elaborate feathered headdress and brandished a round shield and a turquoise snake.

Intonan and Intota

A supreme couple ("Our Mother, Our Father"), Intonan and Intota represent the earth and the sun.

Ometecuhtli and Omecihuatl

metecuhtli (“Lord of the Duality”) and Omecihuatl (“Lady of the Duality”) were held to abide in the 13th heaven: they decided on which date a human being would be born, thus determining his destiny.

QUETZALCÓATL

Quetzalcóatl, (from Nahuatl *quetzalli*, “tail feather of the quetzal bird [*Pharomachrus mocinno*],” and *coatl*, “snake”), the Feathered Serpent, is one of the major deities of the ancient Mexican pantheon. Representations of a feathered snake occur as early as the Teotihuacán civilization (3rd to 8th century CE) on the central plateau. At that time, Quetzalcóatl seems to have been conceived as a vegetation god—an earth and water deity closely associated with the rain god Tlaloc.

With the immigration of Nahua-speaking tribes from the north, Quetzalcóatl’s cult underwent drastic changes. The subsequent Toltec culture (9th through 12th centuries), centred at the city of Tula, emphasized war and human sacrifice linked with the worship of heavenly bodies. Quetzalcóatl became the god of the morning and evening star, and his temple was the centre of ceremonial life in Tula.

In Aztec times (14th through 16th centuries) Quetzalcóatl was revered as the patron of priests, the inventor of the calendar and of books, and the protector of goldsmiths and other craftsmen; he was also identified with the planet Venus. As the morning and evening star, Quetzalcóatl was the symbol of death and resurrection. With his companion Xólotl, a dog-headed god, he was said to have descended to the underground hell of Mictlan to gather the bones of the ancient dead. Those bones he anointed with his own blood, giving birth to the men who inhabit the present universe.

An Aztec round dance for Quetzalcóatl (the Feathered Serpent) and Xolotl (a dog-headed god who is Quetzalcóatl's companion) is depicted in this detail from a facsimile of the Codex Borbonicus, c. *1520 CE.* Courtesy of the Newberry Library, Chicago

One important body of myths describes Quetzalcóatl as the priest-king of Tula, the capital of the Toltec. He never offered human victims, only snakes, birds, and butterflies. But the god of the night sky, Tezcatlipoca, expelled him from Tula by performing feats of black magic. Quetzalcóatl wandered down to the coast of the "divine water" (the Atlantic Ocean) and then immolated himself on a pyre, emerging as the planet Venus. According to another version, he embarked upon a raft made of snakes and disappeared beyond the eastern horizon.

The legend of the victory of Tezcatlipoca over the Feathered Serpent probably reflects historical fact. The first century of the Toltec civilization was dominated by the Teotihuacán culture, with its inspired ideals of priestly rule and peaceful behaviour. The pressure of the northern immigrants brought about a social and religious revolution, with a military ruling class seizing power from the priests. Quetzalcóatl's defeat symbolized the downfall of the Classic theocracy. His sea voyage to the east should probably be connected with the invasion of Yucatán by the Itzá, a tribe that showed strong Toltec features. Quetzalcóatl's calendar name was Ce Acatl ("One Reed"). The

belief that he would return from the east in a One Reed year led the Aztec sovereign Montezuma II to regard the Spanish conqueror Hernán Cortés and his comrades as divine envoys, because 1519, the year in which they landed on the Mexican Gulf coast, was a One Reed year.

In addition to his guise as a plumed serpent, Quetzalcóatl was often represented as a man with a beard; as Ehécatl, the wind god, he was shown with a mask with two protruding tubes (through which the wind blew) and a conical hat typical of the Huastec tribe of northeastern Mexico. The temple of Quetzalcóatl at Tenochtitlán, the Aztec capital, was a round building, a shape that fitted the god's personality as Ehécatl. Circular temples were believed to please Ehécatl because they offered no sharp obstacles to the wind. Round monuments occur particularly often in Huastec territory.

Quetzalcóatl ruled over the days that bore the name *ehécatl* ("wind") and over the 18th 13-day series of the ritual calendar. He was also the ninth of the 13 gods of the daytime hours. Although he was generally listed as one of the first-rank deities, no ceremonial month was dedicated to his cult.

As the god of learning, of writing, and of books, Quetzalcóatl was particularly venerated in the *calmecac*, religious colleges annexed to the temples, in which the future priests and the sons of the nobility were educated. Outside of Tenochtitlán, the main centre of Quetzalcóatl's cult was Cholula, on the Puebla plateau.

Teteoinnan, Cihuacóatl, and Itzpapálotl

Teteoinnan ("Mother of the Gods"), Cihuacóatl ("Serpent-Woman"), and Itzpapálotl ("Obsidian-Butterfly") are the Aztec fertility goddesses who together gave birth to the young gods of corn, Centéotl, and of flowers, Xochipilli; as symbols of the earth that devoured the bodies and drank the blood, they could appear as a warlike godhead. Each of these figures are aspects of one fertility goddess. The Aztec fertility goddess also gave birth to the moon, stars, and the god of sun and war, Huitzilopochtli. In addition, she is the patron of women who die during childbirth. Her titles include "Mother Goddess of the earth who gives birth to all celestial things," "Goddess of Fire

and Fertility," "Goddess of Life, Death, and Rebirth," and "Mother of the Southern Stars." But she is also depicted as a devouring monster who consumes all living things. She represents both birth and death.

TEZCATLIPOCA

Tezcatlipoca (Nahuatl: "Smoking Mirror") is the god of the Great Bear constellation and of the night sky, one of the major deities of the Aztec pantheon. Tezcatlipoca's cult was brought to central Mexico by the Toltec, Nahua-speaking warriors from the north, about the end of the 10th century CE.

Numerous myths relate how Tezcatlipoca expelled the priest-king Quetzalcóatl, the Feathered Serpent, from the latter's centre at Tula. A protean wizard, Tezcatlipoca caused the death of many Toltec by his black magic and induced the virtuous Quetzalcóatl to sin, drunkenness, and carnal love, thus putting an end to the Toltec golden age. Under his influence the practice of human sacrifice was introduced into central Mexico.

Tezcatlipoca's *nagual*, or animal disguise, was the jaguar, the spotted skin of which was compared to the starry sky. A creator god, Tezcatlipoca ruled over Ocelotonatiuh ("Jaguar-Sun"), the first of the four worlds that were created and destroyed before the present universe.

This c. 1500 CE skull with mosaic is known as the "blue Tezcatlipoca." It is a mosaic mask made from a real human skull and lined with deerskin. It has a removable jaw and was worn as part of a priest's regalia. Shaun Curry/AFP/Getty Images

Tezcatlipoca was generally represented with a stripe of black paint across his face and an obsidian mirror in place of one of his feet. The Postclassic (after 900 CE) Maya-Quiché people of Guatemala revered him as a lightning god under the name Hurakan ("One Foot"). Other representations show Tezcatlipoca with his mirror on his chest. In it he saw everything; invisible and omnipresent, he knew all the deeds and thoughts of humans.

By Aztec times (14th–16th century CE), Tezcatlipoca's manifold attributes and functions had brought him to the summit of the divine hierarchy, where he ruled together with Huitzilopochtli, Tlaloc, and Quetzalcóatl. Called Yoalli Ehécatl ("Night Wind"), Yaotl ("Warrior"), and Telpochtli ("Young Man"), he was said to appear at crossroads at night to challenge warriors. He presided over the *telpochcalli* ("young men's houses"), district schools in which the sons of the common people received an elementary education and

military training. He was the protector of slaves and severely punished masters who ill-treated “Tezcatlipoca’s beloved children.” He rewarded virtue by bestowing riches and fame, and he chastised wrongdoers by sending them sickness (e.g., leprosy) or by reducing them to poverty and slavery.

TLALOC

Tlaloc, (Nahuatl: “He Who Makes Things Sprout”), is the Aztec rain god. Representations of a rain god wearing a peculiar mask, with large round eyes and long fangs, date at least to the Teotihuacán culture of the highlands (3rd to 8th century CE). His characteristic features were strikingly similar to those of the Maya rain god Chac of the same period.

During Aztec times (14th to 16th century), Tlaloc’s cult was apparently considered extremely important and had spread throughout Mexico. In the divinatory calendars, Tlaloc was the eighth ruler of the days and the ninth lord of the nights.

Five months of the 18-month ritual year were dedicated to Tlaloc and to his fellow deities, the Tlaloque, who were believed to dwell on the mountaintops. Children were sacrificed to Tlaloc on the first month, Atlcaualo, and on the third, Tozoztontli. During the sixth month, Etzalqualiztli, the rain priests ceremonially bathed in the lake; they imitated the cries of waterfowls and used magic “fog rattles” (*ayauhchicauaztli*) in order to obtain rain. The 13th month, Tepeilhuitl, was dedicated to the mountain Tlaloque; small idols made of amaranth paste were ritually killed and eaten. A similar rite was held on the 16th month, Atemoztli.

Tlaloc had been one of the main deities of the agricultural tribes of central Mexico for many centuries, until the warlike northern tribes invaded that part of the country, bringing with them the astral cults of the sun (Huitzilopochtli) and the starry night sky (Tezcatlipoca). Aztec syncretism placed both Huitzilipochtli and Tlaloc at the head of the pantheon. The Teocalli (Great Temple) at Tenochtitlán, the Aztec capital, supported on its lofty pyramid two sanctuaries of equal size: one, dedicated to Huitzilopochtli, was painted in white and red, and the other, dedicated to Tlaloc, was painted in white and blue. The rain god’s high priest, the Quetzalcóatl Tlaloc Tlamacazqui (Feathered Serpent, Priest of Tlaloc) ruled with a title and rank equal to that

of the sun god’s high priest.

Tlaloc was not only highly revered, but he was also greatly feared. He could send out the rain or provoke drought and hunger. He hurled the lightning upon the earth and unleashed the devastating hurricanes. The Tlaloque, it was believed, could send down to the earth different kinds of rain, beneficent or crop-destroying. Certain illnesses, such as dropsy, leprosy, and rheumatism, were said to be caused by Tlaloc and his fellow deities. Although the dead were generally cremated, those who had died from one of the special illnesses or who had drowned or who had been struck by lightning were buried. Tlaloc bestowed on them an eternal and blissful life in his paradise, Tlalocan.

Associated with Tlaloc was his companion Chalchiuhtlicue (“She Who Wears a Jade Skirt”), also called Matlalcueye (“She Who Wears a Green Skirt”), the goddess of freshwater lakes and streams.

TLALOQUES

The Tlaloques are a group of Aztec rain gods who dwelt on mountaintops and were led by Tlaloc.

TLAZOLTÉOTL

Tlazoltéotl (Nahuatl: “Filth Deity”), also called Ixcuina or Tlaelquani, is the Aztec goddess who represented sexual impurity and sinful behaviour. She was probably introduced to the Aztec from the gulf lowlands of Huaxteca. Tlazoltéotl was an important and complex earth-mother goddess.

She was known in four guises, associated with different stages of life. As a young woman, she was a carefree temptress. In her second form she was the destructive goddess of gambling and uncertainty. In her middle age she was the great goddess able to absorb human sin. In her final manifestation she was a destructive and terrifying hag preying upon youths. Tlazoltéotl was

thought to provoke both lust and lustful behaviour, but she could also grant absolution to those who had so sinned. She became best known for her capacity to cleanse such sins during confessionals conducted by her priests. Thus, although she could, in one form, inspire debauched behaviour, she could also forgive sinners and remove corruption from the world. She was portrayed in an elaborate headdress of raw cotton and in some representations wearing the skin of a sacrificial victim or in a costume that featured symbols of the moon.

TONATIUH

Tonatiuh, in Mesoamerican religion, is the Nahua sun deity of the fifth and final era (the Fifth Sun). In most myths of the Mesoamerican Nahua peoples, including those of the Aztec, four eras preceded the era of Tonatiuh, each ended by cataclysmic destruction. Tonatiuh, or Ollin Tonatiuh, was associated with the eagle (at sunrise and sunset) and, in Aztec versions, with the deity Huitzilopochtli.

The Aztec viewed Tonatiuh as a god constantly threatened by the awesome tasks of his daily birth at sunrise, by his death each sunset, and by the immense effort of making his journey across the sky each day. According to Aztec traditions, the gods themselves were believed to practice voluntary sacrifice, first to create Tonatiuh and then to feed him and encourage him on his path through the sky. The worship of Tonatiuh, whose sustenance required human blood and hearts, involved militaristic cults and the practice of frequent human sacrifice to ensure perpetuation of the world.

Tonatiuh is generally represented by a colourful disk. He is best known as he is depicted in the centre of the Aztec calendar, with his eagle’s claw hands clutching human hearts.

XIPE TOTEC

ipe Totec (Nahuatl: “Our Lord the Flayed One”) is the Mesoamerican god of

spring and new vegetation and patron of goldsmiths. Xipe Totec was venerated by the Toltec and Aztec. As a symbol of the new vegetation, Xipe Totec wore the skin of a human victim—the “new skin” that covered the earth in the spring. His statues and stone masks always show him wearing a freshly flayed skin. Representations of Xipe Totec first appeared at Xolalpan, near Teotihuacán, and at Texcoco, in connection with the Mazapan culture—that is, during the Postclassic Toltec phase (9th–12th century CE).

The Aztecs adopted his cult during the reign of Axayacatl (1469–81). During Tlacaxipehualiztli (“Flaying of Men”), the second ritual month of the Aztec year, the priests killed human victims by removing their hearts. They flayed the bodies and put on the skins, which were dyed yellow and called *teocuitlaquemitl* (“golden clothes”). Other victims were fastened to a frame and put to death with arrows; their blood dripping down was believed to symbolize the fertile spring rains. A hymn sung in honour of Xipe Totec called him Yoalli Tlauana (“Night Drinker”) because beneficent rains fell during the night; it thanked him for bringing the Feathered Serpent, who was the symbol of plenty, and for averting drought.

CHAPTER 4

THE CULTURE, RELIGION, AND DEITIES OF THE INCA

For several thousand years before the Spanish invasion of Peru in 1532, a wide variety of high mountain and desert coastal kingdoms developed in western South America. The extraordinary artistic and technological achievements of these people, along with their historical continuity across centuries, have encouraged modern observers to refer to them as a single Andean civilization.

The Inca, also spelled Inka, were South American Indians who, at the time of the Spanish conquest in 1532, ruled an empire that extended along the Pacific Coast and Andean highlands from the northern border of modern Ecuador to the Maule River in central Chile. The Inca established their capital at Cuzco (Peru) in the 12th century. They began their conquests in the early 15th century and within 100 years had gained control of an Andean population of about 12 million people.

A look at a modern map reveals that no single South American state encompasses all of the territories controlled by the Inca before the coming of the Spanish. Rather, these territories were spread over parts of Ecuador, Peru, Bolivia, Chile, and Argentina. In 1532, they were all part of a single Inca state called Tawantinsuyu, the “Realm of the Four Parts.” Earlier, local hegemonies—some coastal, others centred in the mountains, and still others bridging these geographic barriers—had risen, expanded, and eventually collapsed.

The principal sites of Andean civilization and the Inca empire are highlighted on this map.
Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc.

The Mythical Origins of the Inca

In common with other Andean cultures, the Inca left no written records. Their history is known chiefly from the oral tradition that has been preserved through the generations by official “memorizers” and from the written records composed from them after the Spanish conquest. According to their tradition, the Inca originated in the village of Paqari-tampu, about 15 miles (24 km) south of Cuzco. The founder of the Inca dynasty, Manco Capac, led the tribe to settle in Cuzco, which remained thereafter their capital. Until the reign of the fourth emperor, Mayta Capac, in the 14th century, there was little to distinguish the Inca from the many other tribes inhabiting small domains throughout the Andes. Under Mayta Capac the Inca began to expand, attacking and looting the villages of neighbouring peoples and probably assessing some sort of tribute. Under Capac Yupanqui, the next emperor, the Inca first extended their influence beyond the Cuzco Valley, and under

Viracocha Inca, the eighth, they began a program of permanent conquest by establishing garrisons among the settlements of the peoples whom they had conquered.

Several of the modern Andean peoples trace their ancestries to mythical figures who emerged from holes in the ground. These places of origin, or *paqarina*, were regarded as shrines, where religious ceremonies had to be performed. The Inca *paqarina* was located at Paqari-tampu (Paccari Tampu). There are three caves at Paqari-tampu, and the founders of the Inca dynasty—Manco Capac (Manqo Qhapaq), his three brothers, and his four sisters—supposedly emerged from the middle cave. They assumed leadership over 10 groups of people, or *ayllus*, that emerged from the caves on either side and led them on a journey lasting an unknown number of years.

During this period the Inca and their followers moved from village to village in search of enough fertile land to sustain themselves. Manco Capac succeeded in disposing of his three brothers. One of his sisters, Mama Ocllo, bore him a son named Sinchi Roca (Zinchi Roq'a). Eventually, the Inca arrived at the fertile area around Cuzco, where they attacked the local residents and drove them from the land. They then established themselves in Cuzco and gradually began to meddle in the affairs of their neighbours, forcing them to pay tribute in order to retain their freedom.

By this time Manco Capac was quite old and close to death. In order to ensure that all he had accomplished would be preserved for posterity, he named his eldest son, Sinchi Roca, to succeed him to the throne. He then directed his next eldest son to shelter and care for all of his other children and their descendants, who composed the Chima *panaca*. The traditions say little about Sinchi Roca, the second emperor, but apparently he was a peaceful man who made no military campaigns to add lands to the Inca domain. It is not clear whether or not Sinchi Roca married his sister, as his father had done. It is clear, however, that he did not follow his father's lead in naming his eldest son as his successor, for the third emperor, Lloque Yupanqui (Lloq'e Yupanki), had an older brother. Lloque Yupanqui, like his father, was not warlike and added no lands to the Inca domain.

The demand for additional lands and, more importantly, the resources they could provide first became apparent during the reign of the fourth emperor, Mayta Capac (Mayta Qhapaq). The reasons for the appearance of this need in the 14th century are undoubtedly complex, and any single-factor explanation is probably insufficient. But one possible explanation may lie in the fact that

rainfall began to diminish very slightly about this time throughout the central Andes. In an area like the Cuzco Valley, this would imply that some of the marginal farmlands were either abandoned because they could not be watered adequately or were less productive than they had been earlier. Given this situation, if the Inca attempted to maintain their old standard of living, they might have placed some pressure on their food resources. One way of alleviating the problem would have been to acquire additional land and sources of water in an adjacent part of the valley. This is apparently what Mayta Capac did.

Mayta Capac is described in the chronicles as a large, aggressive youth who began fighting with boys from a neighbouring group when he was very young. Pedro de Cieza de León and Pedro Sarmiento de Gamboa (who also was one of the more reliable Spanish chroniclers) indicate that the quarrel began because the Inca were taking water from this group, although they differ on the details concerning who actually took the water. By the time Mayta Capac became emperor, this quarrel had grown into a full-scale war, which the Inca won. They looted the homes of their enemies, took some of their lands, and probably imposed some sort of tribute payment on them.

The Inca Enter the Historical Record

The earliest date that can be confidently assigned to Inca dynastic history is 1438, when Pachacuti Inca Yupanqui, a son of Viracocha Inca, usurped the throne from his brother Inca Urcon. Under Pachacuti Inca Yupanqui (1438–71) the Inca conquered territory south to the Titicaca Basin and north to present-day Quito, making subject peoples of the powerful Chancas, the Quechua, and the kingdom of Chimú. A policy of forced resettlement of large contingents from each conquered people helped ensure political stability by distributing ethnic groups throughout the empire and thus making the organization of revolt very difficult. Local governors were responsible for exacting the labour tax on which the empire was based; the tax could be paid by service in the army, on public works, or in agricultural work.

Under Topa Inca Yupanqui (1471–93) the empire reached its southernmost extent in central Chile, and the last vestiges of resistance on the southern Peruvian coast were eliminated. His death was followed by a struggle for the succession, from which Huayna Capac (1493–1525) emerged successful. Huayna Capac pushed the northern boundary of the empire to the Ancasmayo

River before dying in an epidemic that may have been brought by a tribe from the east that had picked it up from the Spanish at La Plata. His death set off another struggle for succession, which was still unresolved in 1532, when the Spanish arrived in Peru; by 1535 the empire was lost.

This statue of Pachacuti Inca Yupanqui stands in the main square of Cuzco, in Peru. He was the ninth Sapa Inca and ruled from 1438 to 1471. Pachacuti was responsible for the expansion of the kingdom of Cuzco and the establishment of the Inca empire, with the imperial city of Cuzco as its capital. Michael Langford/Gallo Images/Getty Images

Inca society was highly stratified. The emperor ruled with the aid of an aristocratic bureaucracy, exercising authority with harsh and often repressive controls. Inca technology and architecture were highly developed, although not strikingly original. Their irrigation systems, palaces, temples, and fortifications can still be seen throughout the Andes. The economy was based on agriculture, its staples being corn (maize), white and sweet potatoes,

squash, tomatoes, peanuts (groundnuts), chili peppers, coca, cassava, and cotton. They raised guinea pigs, ducks, llamas, alpacas, and dogs. Clothing was made of llama wool and cotton. Houses were of stone or adobe mud. Practically every man was a farmer, producing his own food and clothing.

The Inca built a vast network of roads throughout this empire. It comprised two north-south roads, one running along the coast for about 2,250 miles (3,600 km), the other inland along the Andes for a comparable distance, with many interconnecting links. Many short rock tunnels and vine-supported suspension bridges were constructed. Use of the system was strictly limited to government and military business; a well-organized relay service carried messages in the form of knotted cords at a rate of 150 miles (240 km) a day. The network greatly facilitated the Spanish conquest of the Inca empire.

The descendants of the Inca are the present-day Quechua-speaking peasants of the Andes, who constitute perhaps 45 percent of the population of Peru. They combine farming and herding with simple traditional technology. Rural settlements are of three kinds: families living in the midst of their fields, true village communities with fields outside of the inhabited centres, and a combination of these two patterns. Towns are centres of mestizo (mixed-blood) population. An Indian community is close-knit, its families usually intermarrying. Much of the agricultural work is done cooperatively. Religion is a kind of Roman Catholicism infused with the pagan hierarchy of spirits and deities.

THE ORIGINS AND EXPANSION OF THE INCA STATE

Inca origins and early history are largely shrouded in legends that may be more mythical than factual. Their later history, particularly from the reign of Pachacuti Inca Yupanqui onward, is largely based on fact, even though it presents what the Inca wanted people to know. Whether these historical traditions are true, in the sense that they accurately related what happened, is not so important as the fact that the Inca used them to justify their various imperial conquests.

Inca Rulers and Royal Corporations

Inca Name	Spanish Spelling	Panaca (Royal Corporation)
Manqo Qhapaq	Manco Capac	Chima
Zinchi Roq’a	Sinchi Roca	Rawra
Lloq’e Yupanki	Lloque Yupanqui	’Awayni
Mayta Qhapaq	Mayta Capac	’Uska Mayta
Qhapaq Yupanki	Capac Yupanqui	’Apu Mayta

’Inka Roq’a ’Inka	Inca Roca	Wika-k’iraw
Yawar Waqaq	Yahuar Huacac	’Awqaylli
Wiraqocha ’Inka	Viracocha Inca	Zukzu
’Inka ’Urqon	Inca Urcon	none
Pachakuti ’Inka Yupanki (1438–71)	Pachacuti Inca Yupanqui	’Iñaqa
Thupa ’Inka Yupanki (1471–93)	Topa Inca Yupanqui	Qhapaq
Wayna Qhapaq (1493–1525)	Huayna Capac	Tumipampa
Washkar ’Inka (1525–32)	Huascar	Washkar
’Ataw Wallpa ’Inka (1532–33)	Atahuallpa	none
Thupa Wallpa (1533)	Topa Huallpa	none
Manqo ’Inka Yupanki (1533–45)	Manco Inca Yupanqui	none (?)

The Inca Calendar

Most historians agree that the Inca had a calendar based on the observation of both the sun and the moon, and their relationship to the stars. Names of 12 lunar months are recorded, as well as their association with festivities of the agricultural cycle; but there is no suggestion of the widespread use of a numerical system for counting time, although a quinary decimal system, with names of numbers at least up to 10,000, was used for other purposes. The organization of work on the basis of six weeks of nine days suggests the further possibility of a count by triads that could result in a formal month of 30 days.

In one account, it is said that the Inca creator god Viracocha established a year of 12 months, each beginning with the New Moon, and that his successor, Pachacuti, finding confusion in regard to the year, built the sun towers in order to keep a check on the calendar. Since Pachacuti reigned less than a century before the conquest, it may be that the contradictions and the meagreness of information on the Inca calendar are due to the fact that the system was still in the process of being revised when the Spaniards first arrived.

Despite the uncertainties, further research has made it clear that at least at Cuzco, the capital city of the Incas, there was an official calendar of the sidereal–lunar type, based on the sidereal month of 27 1/3 days. It consisted of 328 nights (12 × 27 1/3) and began on June 8/9, coinciding with the

heliacal rising (the rising just after sunset) of the Pleiades; it ended on the first full moon after the June solstice (the winter solstice for the Southern Hemisphere). This sidereal–lunar calendar fell short of the solar year by 37 days, which consequently were intercalated. This intercalation, and thus the place of the sidereal–lunar within the solar year, was fixed by following the cycle of the Sun as it "strengthened" to summer (December) solstice and "weakened" afterward, and by noting a similar cycle in the visibility of the Pleiades.

These ruins are what remain of the Inca walled fortress of Sacsayhuamán, in Cuzco, Peru. The fortress was made of enormous carved limestone boulders (some weighing more than 300 tons each) that were fit together perfectly without the use of mortar. Danita Delimont/Gallo Images/Getty Images

Inca Religion

The Inca religion combined features of animism, fetishism, and the worship of nature gods. The pantheon was headed by Inti, the sun god, and included also Viracocha, a creator god and culture hero, and Apu Illapu, the rain god. Under the empire the Inca religion was a highly organized state religion, but, while worship of the sun god and the rendering of service were required of subject peoples, their native religions were tolerated. Inca rituals included elaborate forms of divination and the sacrifice of humans and animals. These religious institutions were destroyed by the Spanish conquerors' campaign against idolatry.

Inca Deities

The creator god of the Inca and of pre-Inca peoples was Viracocha, who was also a culture hero. Creator of earth, man, and animals, Viracocha had a long list of titles, including Lord Instructor of the World, the Ancient One, and the Old Man of the Sky. Some have said that he also was the creator of the Tiwanaku civilization, of which the Inca were the cultural heirs.

Viracocha went through several transmogrifications (often with grotesque or humorous effects). He made peoples, destroyed them, and re-created them of stone; and when they were re-created, he dispersed humankind in four directions. As a culture hero, he taught people various techniques and skills. He journeyed widely until he came to the shores of Manta (Ecuador), where he set off into the Pacific—some say in a boat made of his cloak, others say he walked on the water. This part of the myth has been seized upon by modern mythmakers, and, as Kon-Tiki, Viracocha was said to have brought Inca culture to Polynesia.

Viracocha was the divine protector of the Inca ruler Pachacuti Inca Yupanqui; he appeared to Pachacuti in a dream when the Inca forces were being besieged by the Chanca. Upon victory, Pachacuti raised a temple to Viracocha in Cuzco. He was represented by a gold figure “about the size of a 10-year-old child.”

Inti, the sun god, was the ranking deity in the Inca pantheon. His warmth embraced the Andean earth and matured crops; and as such he was beloved by farmers. Inti was represented with a human face on a ray-splayed disk. He was considered to be the divine ancestor of the Inca: “my father” was a title given to Inti by one Inca ruler.

This carved figure on the megalithic Inca stone arch known as the Gateway of the Sun, in Tiwanaku, Bolivia, may be the creator god Viracocha, though some scholars believe it might also represent a sun god, a thunder god, or a doorway god. Georg Gerster/Rapho/Photo Researchers

Apu Illapu, the rain giver, was an agricultural deity to whom the common man addressed his prayers for rain. Temples to Illapu were usually on high structures; in times of drought, pilgrimages were made to them and prayers were accompanied by sacrifices—often human, if the crisis was sufficient. The people believed that Illapu's shadow was in the Milky Way, from whence he drew the water that he poured down as rain.

Mama Quilla (Mama-Kilya), wife of the sun god, was the Moon Mother and the regulator of women's menstrual cycles. The waxing and waning of the moon was used to calculate monthly cycles, from which the time periods for Inca festivals were set. Silver was considered to be tears of the moon. The stars had minor functions. The constellation of Lyra, which was believed to have the appearance of a llama, was entreated for protection. The constellation Scorpio was believed to have the shape of a cat; the Pleiades were called "little mothers," and festivals were celebrated on their reappearance in the sky. Earth was called Pachamama (Paca Mama), or Earth Mother. The sea, which was relatively remote to the Inca until after 1450, was called Cochamama (Mama Qoca), the Sea Mother.

Temples and Shrines

Temples and shrines housing fetishes of the cult were occupied by priests, their attendants, and the Chosen Women. In general, temples were not intended to shelter the celebrants, since most ceremonies were held outside the temple proper. The ruins of the Temple of Viracocha at San Pedro Cacha (Peru), however, had a ground plan that measured 330 by 87 feet (91.44 by 26.5 m), which indicates that it was designed for use other than the storage of priestly regalia.

The Sun Temple in Cuzco is the best-known of the Inca temples. Another, at Vilcashuman (which was regarded as the geographic centre of the empire), has a large temple still existing. Near Mount Aconcagua in Argentina, at the southern limit of the Inca empire, “there was a temple…an ancient oracle held in high regard where they made their sacrifices,” and on Titicaca Island, one of the largest of several islands in Lake Titicaca, there was a temple of the sun.

As the Inca conquered new territories, temples were erected in the new lands. In Caranqui, Ecuador, one such temple was described by a chronicler as being filled with great vessels of gold and silver. At Latacunga (Llacta cunga) in Ecuador there was a sun temple where sacrifices were made; part of the temple was still visible when the German explorer and geographer Alexander von Humboldt sketched the ruins in 1801.

The Sun Temple in Cuzco, built with stones “all matched and joined,” had a circumference of more than 1,200 feet (366 m). A fragment of the wall still extant is testimony to the accuracy of the chronicler’s description. Within the temple was an image of the sun “of great size,” and in another precinct, the Golden Enclosure (Corincancha), were gold models of cornstalks, llamas, and lumps of earth. Portions of the land, which supported the temples, the priests, and the Chosen Women, were allotted to the sun and administered for the priests.

This is a reconstructed room within the Coricancha, or "Temple of the Sun." The temple was originally decorated with gold and served as the spiritual center of the imperial capital, Cuzco. Werner Forman/Universal Images Group/Getty Images

Along with the shrines and temples, *huacas* (sacred sites) were widespread. A *huaca* could be a man-made temple, mountain, hill, or bridge, such as the great *huacachaca* across the Apurímac River. A *huaca* also might be a mummy bundle, especially if it was that of a lord-Inca. On high points of passage in the Andes, propitiatory cairns (*apacheta*, "piles of stones") were made, to which, in passing, each person would add a small stone and pray that his journey be lightened. The idea of *huaca* was intimately bound up with religion, combining the magical and the charm-bearing.

THE CHOSEN WOMEN

In Inca religion, Chosen Women (Quechua Aclla Cuna or Aklya Kona; "Virgins of the Sun") were women who lived in temple convents under a vow of chastity. Their duties included the preparation of ritual food, the maintenance of a sacred fire, and the weaving of garments for the emperor and for ritual use. They were under the supervision of matrons called Mama Cuna.

At the time of the Spanish conquest in the early 16th century, the Virgins numbered several thousand and were governed by a high priestess, the Coya Pasca, a noblewoman who was believed to be the earthly consort of the sun god. The Virgins, not of noble birth, were village girls selected by officials for their beauty and talent; they were chosen at the age of 8 or 10 and shut up in the temples, which they were not allowed to leave for six or seven years. Of these girls, some became sacrificial victims, whereas others were sometimes made imperial concubines or the wives of

nobles.

The Priesthood

Priests resided at all important shrines and temples. A chronicler suggests that a priest's title was *umu*, but in usage his title was geared to his functions as diviner of lungs, sorcerer, confessor, and curer. The title of the chief priest in Cuzco, who was of noble lineage, was *villac umu*. He held his post for life, was married, and competed in authority with the Inca. He had power over all shrines and temples and could appoint and remove priests. Presumably, priests were chosen young, brought up by the more experienced, and acquired with practice the richly developed ceremonialism.

Divination

Divination was the prerequisite to all action. Nothing of importance was undertaken without recourse to divination. It was used to diagnose illness, to predict the outcome of battles, and to ferret out crimes, thus giving it a judiciary function. Divination was also used to determine what sacrifice should be made to what god. Life was believed to be controlled by the all-pervading unseen powers, and to determine these portents the priests had recourse to the supernatural.

Oracles were considered to be the most important and direct means of access to the wayward gods. One oracle of a *huaca* close to the Huaca–Chaca Bridge, across the Apurímac River near Cuzco, was described by a chronicler as a wooden beam as thick as a fat man, with a girdle of gold about it with two large golden breasts like a woman. These and other idols were bloodspattered from sacrifices—animal and human. "Through this large idol," a chronicler wrote, "the demon of the river used to speak to them." Another well-known oracle was housed in a temple in the large adobe complex of Pachacamac near Lima.

Divination was also accomplished by watching the meandering of spiders and the arrangement that coca leaves took in a shallow dish. Another method of divination was to drink ayahuasca, a narcotic that had profound effects on the central nervous system. This was believed to enable one to communicate with the supernatural powers.

Fire was also believed to provide spiritual contact. The flames were blown to red heat through metal tubes, after which a practitioner (*yacarca*) who had narcotized himself by chewing coca leaves summoned the spirits with fiery conjuration to speak—"which they did," wrote a chronicler, by "ventriloquism." Divination by studying the lungs of a sacrificed white llama was considered to be efficacious. The lungs were inflated by blowing into the dissected trachea (there is an Inca ceramic showing this), and the future was foretold by priests who minutely observed the conformance of the veins. On the reading of this augury, political or military action was taken.

Confession was part of the priestly ritual of divination. Should rain not fall or a water conduit break without cause, it was believed that such an occurrence could arise from someone's failure to observe the strictly observed ceremonies. This was called *hocha*, a ritual error. The *ayllu*, a basic social unit identified with communally held land, was wounded by individual misdeeds. Crimes had to be confessed and expiated by penitence so as not to call down the divine wrath.

Sacrifice

Sacrifice, human or animal, was offered on every important occasion; guinea pigs (more properly *cui*), llamas, certain foods, coca leaves, and *chicha* (an intoxicant corn beverage) were all used in sacrifices. Many sacrifices were daily occurrences for the ritual of the sun's appearance. A fire was kindled, and corn was thrown on the coals and toasted. "Eat this, Lord Sun," was the objuration of officiating priests, "so that you will know that we are your children." On the first day of every lunar month 100 pure-white llamas were driven into the Great Square, Huayaca Pata in Cuzco; they were moved about to the various images of the gods and then assigned to 30 priestly attendants, each representing a day of the month. The llamas were then sacrificed; chunks of flesh were thrown onto the fire, and the bones were powdered for ritual use. Ponchos of excellent weave or miniature vestments were burned in the offering. The Inca ruler wore his poncho only once: it was ceremoniously sacrificed in fire each day.

Incas offer sacrifices of corn and llamas to spirits of the mountain in this facsimile of a codex illustration. Werner Forman/Universal Images Group/Getty Images

Humans were also sacrificed; when the need was extreme, 200 children might be immolated, such as when a new Inca ruler assumed the royal fringe. Defeats, famine, and pestilence all called for human blood. Even a Chosen Woman from the Sun Temple might be taken out for sacrifice. Children, before being sacrificed, were feasted "so that they would not enter the presence of the gods hungry and crying." It was important in human sacrifice that the sacrificed person be without blemish. Many were chosen from the conquered provinces as part of regular taxation; "blood money" was scarcely a metaphor.

Festivals

The 30-day calendar was religious, and each month had its own festival. The religious calendar is explained in considerable detail by Guamán Poma de Ayala. In his letter to Philip II he offered two different versions, one centring on state ceremonies and sacrifices performed at Cuzco and the other describing the agricultural practices at the local level in the highlands. Quite different calendars prevailed on the irrigated coast, but surviving sources do not record them in any detail.

Months and Celebrations of the Inca Calendar

Gregorian Months	Andean Months	Approximate Translation
December	Capac Raimi, Capac Quilla	the lord festival; the month of rest
January	Zarap Tuta Cavai Mitan	the time to watch the growing corn
February	Paucar Varai	the time to wear loincloths
March	Pacha Pucuy Quilla	the month of the land's maturation
April	Camai Quilla (Inti Raymi in state calendar)	the month of harvest and rest
May	Zara Muchuy Quilla Aymoray Quilla	dry corn to be stored
June	Papa Allai Mitan Pacha Haucai Cusqui	potato harvest rest from harvesting
July	Chacra Conaqui Quilla	the month of redistributing lands
August	Chacra Yapuy Quilla Hailly	the month to open lands coming into cultivation with songs of triumph

September	Zara Tarpuy Quilla Coia Raymi Quilla	the month for planting; also, the Festival of the Queen
October	Chacramanta Pisco Carcoy	the time to scare birds out of newly planted fields
November	Chacra Parcay	the time to irrigate fields

APU ILLAPU

Apu Illapu, the rain giver, was an agricultural deity to whom the Inca addressed their prayers for rain.

COCHAMAMA

Cochamama (Mama Qoca) was the Inca Sea Mother.

THE CONSTELLATION OF LYRA

The constellation of Lyra, which was believed to have the appearance of a llama, was entreated for protection. The Inca referred to Lyra as Urcuchillay. She was worshipped by Inca herders because she was believed to watch over animals. She took the form of a multicoloured llama.

INTI

nti, also called Apu-punchau, was the Inca sun god; he was believed to be the

ancestor of the Inca. Inti was at the head of the state cult, and his worship was imposed throughout the Inca empire. He was usually represented in human form, his face portrayed as a gold disk from which rays and flames extended. Inti's sister and consort was the moon, Mama-Kilya (or Mama Quilla), who was portrayed as a silver disk with human features. Inti and Mama-Kilya were considered benevolent gods. Mama-Kilya gave birth to the earth. Inti taught his son Manco Capac and daughter Mama Ocllo the arts of civilization and ordered them to share this knowledge with humanity. He also ordered his children to build the Inca capital of Cuzco. Inca rulers were believed to be living representatives of Inti. The High Priest of the Sun was the second most powerful person in the empire and was usually the brother of the ruler. The emperor's family were all believed to be descended from Inti. Among the 20th-century Quechua people, Inti is occasionally confused with Christ or God.

This is an artist's rendering of the Temple of the Sun in Cuzco, before the Spanish conquest. The men are worshipping an image of Inti, the Inca sun god. DEA/A. Dagli Orti/De Agostini/ Getty Images

Inti-raymi was one of a cycle of *raymi*, or "festivals." Held in June (after the Spanish conquest, in May or June to coincide with the feast of Corpus Christi), Inti-raymi honoured the sun god and was celebrated with animal sacrifices and ritual dances.

Originally, it was celebrated at the winter solstice, and honored the "resurrection of the sun." Worshippers would fast for three days before the

festival and refrain from lighting any fires. The festival itself lasted for nine days and featured sacrifices and copious feasting. In modern times, the festival attracts thousands of tourists to the ancient city of Cuzco.

The "Little Mothers"

The Pleiades were called "little mothers," and festivals were celebrated on their reappearance in the sky.

Mama Quilla

Mama Quilla (Mama-Kilya), wife of the sun god, was the Moon Mother and the regulator of women's menstrual cycles.

Pachamama

Pachamama (Paca Mama) was the Inca Earth Mother. She is a fertility goddess who watches over planting and harvesting, but she also causes earthquakes. In some versions of Andean mythology, she is the wife of Inti, the sun god. After the Spanish conquest, Pachamama became merged with the figure of the Virgin Mary. Even today, however, people offer a toast or libation to Pachamama before meetings and festivities to garner good luck and good will. She still has a worship day—it occurs on Shrove Tuesday, or Mardi Gras, the Tuesday before Ash Wednesday and the beginning of Lent—when people bury food, throw candies, and burn incense in her honor.

Viracocha

Viracocha, also spelled Huiracocha or Wiraqoca, was the creator deity originally worshipped by the pre-Inca inhabitants of Peru and later assimilated into the Inca pantheon. He was believed to have created the sun and moon on Lake Titicaca. Viracocha was one of the most important deities in the Inca pantheon and seen as the creator of all things, or the substance from which all things are created. He is strongly associated with the sea. In addition to the sun and moon, Viracocha created the universe, stars, time, and civilization itself. Viracocha was worshipped as both a sun god and a god of storms. He was represented as wearing the sun for a crown, with thunderbolts in his hands, and tears descending from his eyes as rain. In some versions of the mythology, he is the father of Inti and Mama-Kilya.

This stele, or stone slab, is carved with the image of Viracocha, the Inca creator deity. Werner Forman/Universal Images Group/Getty Images

According to tradition, after forming the rest of the heavens and the earth, Viracocha wandered through the world teaching men the arts of civilization.

At Manta (Ecuador), he walked westward across the Pacific, promising to return one day. He was sometimes represented as an old man wearing a beard (a symbol of water gods) and a long robe and carrying a staff.

The cult of Viracocha is extremely ancient, and it is possible that he is the weeping god sculptured in the megalithic ruins at Tiwanaku, near Lake Titicaca. He probably entered the Inca pantheon at a relatively late date, possibly under the emperor Viracocha (died *c*. 1438), who took the god's name. The Inca believed that Viracocha was a remote being who left the daily working of the world to the surveillance of the other deities that he had created. He was actively worshipped by the nobility, primarily in times of crisis.

GLOSSARY

apotheosis The perfect form or example of something; the highest or best part of something; elevation to divine status.

codex (plural: codices) A manuscript book, especially of scripture, classics, or ancient annals.

cosmogony A theory of the origin of the universe; the creation or origin of the world or universe.

cosmology The scientific study of the origin and structure of the universe; a branch of metaphysics that deals with the nature of the universe; a theory or doctrine describing the natural order of the universe; a branch of astronomy that deals with the origin, structure, and space-time relationships of the universe.

decipher To decode; to make out the meaning of despite indistinctness or obscurity; to interpret the meaning of.

deity A god or goddess; the rank or essential nature of a god; divinity; a supreme being; one exalted or revered as supremely good or powerful.

divination The art or practice that seeks to foresee or foretell future events or discover hidden knowledge usually by the interpretation of omens or by the aid of supernatural powers; unusual insight; intuitive perception.

dynasty A succession of rulers of the same line of descent; a powerful group or family that maintains its position for a considerable time.

eschatology A branch of theology concerned with the final events in the history of the world or of humankind; a belief concerning death, the end of the world, or the ultimate destiny of humankind.

esoteric Designed for or understood by the specially initiated alone; requiring or exhibiting knowledge that is restricted to a small group; difficult to understand; limited to a small circle; of special, rare, or unusual interest.

ethnohistory A study of the development of cultures.

ethnology A science that deals with the division of human beings into races and their origin, distribution, relations, and characteristics; anthropology dealing chiefly with the comparative and analytical study of cultures; cultural anthropology.

godhead Divine nature or essence.

hieroglyphic Written in, constituting, or belonging to a system of writing mainly in pictorial characters.

indigenous Produced, growing, living, or occurring naturally in a particular region or environment; innate; inborn.

Mesoamerica Region of Mexico and Central America that was occupied during pre-Columbian times by peoples (as the Olmec, Maya, Aztec) with shared cultural features.

Neolithic Of or relating to the latest period of the Stone Age characterized by polished stone implements; belonging to an earlier age and now outmoded.

pantheon A temple dedicated to all the gods; a building serving as the burial place of or containing memorials to the famous dead of a nation; the gods of a people, especially the officially recognized gods; a group of illustrious or notable persons or things.

piety The quality or state of being pious; dutifulness in religion; devoutness; fidelity to natural obligations (as to parents); a conventional belief or standard.

pilgrimage A journey of a believer or devotee to a shrine or a sacred place; the course of life on earth.

precursor One that precedes and indicates the approach of another; a predecessor.

prophecy A statement that something will happen in the future; the power or ability to know what will happen in the future.

propitiate To make (someone) pleased or less angry by giving or saying something desired.

stele (plural: stelae) Standing stone tablet used in the ancient world primarily as a grave marker but also for dedication, commemoration, and demarcation. Though the stele's origin is unknown, a stone slab was commonly used as a tombstone in Egypt, Greece, Asia, and the Mayan empire.

syncretism The combination of different forms of belief or practice.

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